

MIGRANT VOICE

# HEROES, THREATS & VICTIMS

UK MEDIA COVERAGE  
OF MIGRATION  
DURING THE FIRST  
COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

DECEMBER 2020



---

# CONTENTS

ABOUT MIGRANT VOICE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	
Introduction	3
Key findings	3
Migrant Voice's response to the findings	5
INTRODUCTION	6
METHODOLOGY	8
QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS	10
QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS	
Peaks in coverage	24
Frames	28
Migrant voices	37
Policy calls	40
CONCLUSION	43

---

# ABOUT MIGRANT VOICE

Migrant Voice is the voice of migrants, a voice with a purpose. We are a UK-based, migrant-led organisation developing the skills and confidence of migrants, empowering them to speak for themselves about their own lives and issues that affect their communities, to speak clearly and effectively and thus drive the change they seek.

Whether speaking out in the media or on public or political platforms, the aim is to create positive change for migrants – countering xenophobia, discrimination and

unjust policies, strengthening communities, and bringing social justice – change which benefits the whole of UK society.

We work with migrants regardless of their status and country of origin, including refugees and asylum seekers. We are truly national, working across London, Glasgow and the West Midlands, and we have a large and growing network of migrants and non-migrants (currently 1,300) willing to engage in promoting migrant voices and creating change.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Migrant Voice would like to thank all our fantastic volunteers who worked to help design and develop this research, gather and analyse the data, and put this report together: Liam Barrowcliffe, Abigail Catania, Natalie Shortall, Giuliano Giannini and Peter Espersen. Thank you also to Daniel Nelson for his editing and proofreading work.

---

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

Early 2020 saw the global spread of Covid-19, a virus fatal to some and spreading fear and uncertainty around the world. In this context, we at Migrant Voice saw it as vital to monitor news coverage of migrants and migration in this unprecedented period.

We analysed coverage across nine online news platforms (The Sun, Mail Online, The Independent, The Guardian, Express, Mirror, The Telegraph, BBC and ITV) between 1 March and 31 May 2020, covering the lead-up to and the majority of the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. (See Methodology on pp.8-9 for further details.)

## KEY FINDINGS

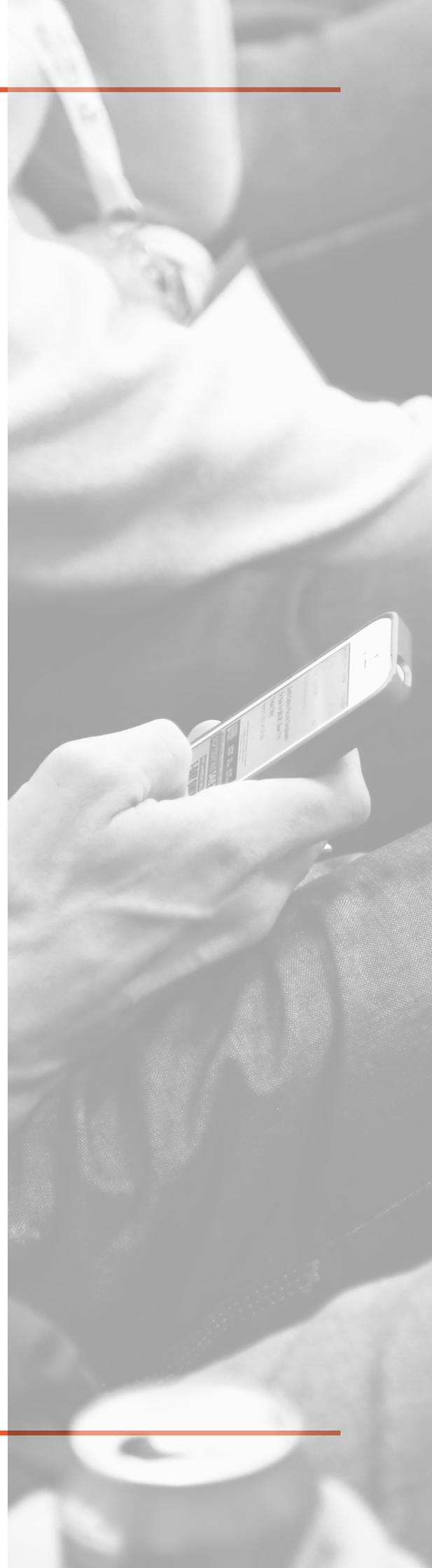
- Across our selected outlets and timeframe, 2,786 articles were returned by our key search terms related to migrants and migration. Of these, 889 articles (about 32%) were related specifically to the UK context and analysed in depth.
- Of the 889 articles, 529 were related to Covid-19. At least one of four predetermined 'frames' was identified in most of those articles. The 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified most frequently at 49.7%, 'Heroes' at 20.9%, 'Threats' at 15.9% and 'One of us' at 13.5%. The ratio in framings varied significantly across outlets, however. 'Disadvantaged' was most common in all but the Express, The Sun and The Telegraph. In these outlets the 'Threats' frame was identified most frequently.
- Across all outlets, 21% of articles analysed included a migrant voice - the perspective of an individual whose lived reality reflects the topic of the article. Migrant voices were found most commonly in The Guardian (33.5% of articles), with The Independent a close second. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Express included a migrant voice in only 3.9% of articles. Across all outlets, a migrant voice was more likely to be included in articles where a 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified (59.3%) and least likely in those that portrayed migrants as 'Threats' (2.8%).
- Of the 889 articles analysed, 223 included a call for a particular policy change. We found a close relationship between the most frequently reported calls for policy change and policy changes announced by the Government. Media outlets published dozens of articles that included a call to end the International Health Surcharge (IHS) for NHS workers or to extend their visas - and we later saw dozens of articles reporting on those exact policy changes (although limited to some NHS workers only). While these policy changes were extremely welcome, it is disappointing that it was only migrants who had been presented as 'Heroes' across the media for weeks who benefited from policy changes, and that far less frequently reported - but no less important - calls for change for asylum seekers and migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds, for example, did not lead to the desired changes.

(Key findings continue on next page)

---

## KEY FINDINGS (CONT.)

- The most significant peak in coverage of migration in this period occurred 18-22 May. This was largely driven by coverage of the Immigration Bill and the commotion surrounding the IHS. The latter was a rare example of a story where all news outlets (bar the Express, initially at least) were united in their criticism of Government policy. A smaller peak occurred around 8-9 April, largely due to the guilty plea by the driver of the lorry in which 39 migrants were found dead in Essex in October 2019. This was one of only a small number of topics unrelated to Covid-19 to be reported on frequently in this period.
- There was a tendency across media outlets to box migrants into very specific categories and sub-categories (such as 'Channel crossers', 'frontline NHS workers', 'asylum seekers') and to present these groups in simplistic ways, as 'Heroes' or 'Threats', for example. In doing so, emphasis is placed on a particular and often time-limited action, the service a group is providing or on their legal status, rather than on their existence as individual human beings. This fuelled the existing narrative of the good or deserving migrant and the bad or undeserving migrant. In some cases, we found that the same group of migrants (e.g. agricultural workers) was presented one day as 'Threats' and the next as 'Heroes', highlighting both the pervasiveness and absurdity of these categorisations.
- Migrant voices were included in just 2.8% of stories where the 'Threats' frame was identified, many of which were related to Channel crossings. By including quotations from anti-migrant voices that paint those arriving as a threatening Other and focusing heavily on statistics, many of these articles dehumanised the people making the crossing. Four in ten stories with a 'Disadvantaged' frame also did not include a migrant voice. Here, readers were often left with the impression of migrants as passive, vulnerable victims.
- Where the right-wing tabloids did include migrant voices (which was less often on average than the other outlets), these were often the voices of high-profile or successful migrants who could be presented as heroic anomalies, such as Syrian refugee, filmmaker and hospital cleaner Hassan Akkad. News outlets at the other end of the spectrum, such as The Guardian and The Independent, were more likely to include quotations from several different, ordinary migrants in a story and to present them as representative of others in a similar position, as well as rounded human beings.



---

## MIGRANT VOICE'S RESPONSE TO THESE FINDINGS

Our work as an organisation is focused on creating opportunities for migrants to tell their stories and be heard in the media and in broader public debate. We therefore welcome the finding that 21% of the stories analysed in this research included the voice of a migrant directly affected by the issue being reported on. While this is still not high enough, it is a significant improvement on [our 2014 research](#), when the figure was just 12%.

We are concerned, however, that this change may only be temporary, the result of an unprecedented situation where issues impacting migrant groups were both exacerbated and spotlighted as never before. This concern is partly rooted in our experience as an organisation during 2020. As the pandemic took hold in the UK, it initially became harder to interest journalists in the stories of our members, especially when they were unrelated to Covid-19. But there did then follow a period of several months during which we received much higher numbers of media requests than usual and when journalists were especially keen to speak to members impacted by issues that are usually ignored by the media, such as the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition, for example. This surge of interest has since subsided, however, leaving us concerned that the drive to include migrant voices may have been a temporary phenomenon.

We are also concerned that the widespread use of framing to categorise particular groups of migrants as threats, heroes or disadvantaged victims, for example, reflects and further entrenches stereotyped views about migrants and a narrative that suggests some migrants are more deserving of rights and respect than others. By reinforcing the idea that one must have a certain job or look and behave a certain way to be deemed worthy of a place and fair treatment in the UK, the concept of common humanity that was touted so frequently during that first lockdown is undermined.

We saw the consequences of this play out in the two major migration-related policy changes that took place during the first

lockdown and were widely reported on - the International Health Surcharge exemption and visa extensions for some NHS workers. We welcome these changes, but we are troubled that only one narrow subsection of migrants - those identified and hailed as 'Heroes' - benefited from significant policy change and, in the case of the visa extensions, only on a temporary basis. Policy change should happen because it is the right thing to do, not because of front-page headlines, not because those who will benefit are themselves of benefit to the UK (saving lives or picking the food that feeds the country), and not because it's in the interest of the Government.

Yet there are positives here too. Firstly, it is heartening to see that extensive media coverage of an issue can contribute to shifting the Government's position (even if that shift is also self-serving). Secondly, as a result of this year's unprecedented situation, journalists, policymakers and the public are now much more educated about issues such as NRPF, asylum support and immigration detention, and we hope this can form the groundwork for more significant policy changes in the future. Finally, we have seen how major events can create opportunities for conversations and for change that are impossible at any other time. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, we will seek to keep those conversations going and build on the change that has happened so far.

This research project has shown that the principles and recommendations laid out in our [2014 toolkit](#) created for journalists writing about migration are still highly relevant and we urge journalists, editors and journalism students to read and engage with this. As we continue to live through this pandemic and look ahead to more normal times, we encourage journalists to remember that migrants are a primary and highly valuable source of information for stories about migration, that every migrant is a unique human being with a moving, dramatic, funny or inspirational story to tell, and that including migrant voices leads to fairer, more accurate, more engaging reporting, something every good journalist wants to achieve.

---

# INTRODUCTION

Media reporting is an incredibly powerful tool in influencing and educating the public, especially in moments of crisis. Although political agendas and biases can often result in the use of wilfully inflammatory language, media reports, when executed well, can offer an effective means of holding public figures to account, raising awareness about important matters and dispelling myths. Many journalists are careful fact checkers, avoiding the sensationalist angles and misleading headlines that can cause remarkable harm to individuals and groups. However, journalists also work under pressure, tied to the tight deadlines of the news cycle. There is often little time for rigorous scrutiny over the terms used or their social impacts. Yet the media are also in the privileged position of being able to shape attitudes and write the first draft of history. With this comes the responsibility to report on contentious topics in accurate, fair and nuanced ways. Immigration is no exception.

The coverage of immigrants and immigration by British media outlets has received significant attention in the past few years. In 2016 [an alarming analysis](#) found that between 2010 and 2016 the Daily Express published 179 front cover pages devoted to migration stories, with the Daily Mail occupying second place with a sizable 122 - with many of these stories presenting migrants as a problem or threat. The previous year, [a study by the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies](#) found that UK coverage of refugees and migrants in 2014-15 was "the most negative" compared to coverage in Italy, Spain, Germany and Sweden: "Amongst those countries surveyed, Britain's right-wing media was uniquely aggressive in its campaigns against refugees and migrants." A 2020 study analysing coverage of asylum seekers during 2017 found that, "When the UK media wrote about asylum in Europe, the topics of terrorism and violence perpetrated by refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants was statistically higher than would be expected."

Not all UK media outlets follow these trends, of course. But when we consider that Britain's traditional right-wing media have a current daily reach of [more than 24 million people](#), we can start to understand the impact of this coverage. The drip-feed - or even deluge - of negative coverage, combined with the power-setting agenda of mainstream media, both responded to and fuelled an environment where, for many years, migrants were seen as a problem and immigration as one of the most pressing issues facing the UK. As the American political scientist Bernard Cohen succinctly put it back in 1963, the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". Towards the end of 2019, however, UK coverage of migration was diminishing and [public concern in the topic dwindling](#).

Then Covid-19 happened. Not only was the media suddenly awash with stories about the pandemic and its implications, but the vast contributions and sacrifices that migrants make for society became unavoidably clear. Those who before might have been labelled 'benefit scroungers' or denigrated for 'stealing British jobs' became 'key workers', routinely applauded on a Thursday evening for keeping the country afloat.

It was particularly NHS workers who found themselves in the spotlight. From Jenny McGee and Luis Pitarma, the migrants who nursed the Prime Minister back to good health after he was hospitalised with Covid-19, to consultants, porters and cleaners, [170,000 migrant workers](#) all played important roles in keeping the UK's beloved NHS functioning throughout the peak of the pandemic.

(Introduction continues on next page)

---

Despite these immense contributions during a time of crisis and anxiety, Boris Johnson continued to back the International Health Surcharge (IHS) for NHS workers - a then £400 (now £624) per year fee that migrants must pay in addition to their visa - until public pressure forced a U-turn. All the while, Home Secretary Priti Patel pushed her Immigration Bill as 'firm' and 'fair', even though the new points-based system for migrant workers will make it much harder for those in lower-paid positions, including (some) healthcare workers, to come to the UK. This category includes supermarket workers who kept our shelves stocked and fridges full, care workers who risked their health to nurse our elderly, and agricultural labourers integral to our food supply chain.

On the one hand, there was recognition that migrants play an essential role in our economy and public life, which surfaced in unexpected and unprecedented ways. (It's important to note, however, that such recognition was largely only afforded to specific groups who were valued for their contribution of particular skills and for risking their lives - hardly a situation they would choose - to save others.) On the other hand, coverage showed that Government discourse tended to toe a hard line as the country redesigned its approach to immigration post-Brexit. How were these conflicting ideas reflected in or fuelled by the media? And in all this coverage of Covid-19, key workers and the Immigration Bill, who was given a platform to speak?

At Migrant Voice we believe that migrant perspectives ought to be amplified by the media where its dialogue pertains to their lives and experiences. But in a 2014 study we found that migrants were vastly underrepresented in British media, often reported on but rarely afforded a platform of their own. This is consistent with Europe-wide findings (see also here). In a society where two-thirds of migrants say that media and political discourse has an impact on their sense of belonging, it is important that the media landscape is scrutinised, including the question of who gets to speak. This becomes even more important during unprecedented situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic, when social inequalities - many of which impact migrants - are exacerbated.

We also believe it's important for the media to incorporate migrant perspectives in a way that moves beyond reductive stereotypes and frames. Migrant Voice has been involved with previous research, led by Coventry University, that found it was not just negative 'migrants as threats' coverage that dominated British media, but also the tendency to portray migrants as agentless victims of globalisation and inequality. Even if articles included a migrant voice, they tended to present migrants' circumstances as exceptional and the migrants themselves as dependent on their host society. Such reporting can undermine public solidarity, breed resentment among members of the host community, solidify an "us and them" mindset, or rely heavily on emotive responses that are conducive neither to informed political debate nor good policymaking.

Fundamentally, the purpose of this report is to investigate the frames and stereotypes deployed in UK media coverage of migration during the first Covid-19 lockdown; to raise important questions about the depiction of migrants and migration, in both periods of crisis and more 'normal' times; and to expose the importance of nuanced reporting that reflects the diversity in migrant experiences.

# METHODOLOGY

We selected seven print media outlets to analyse their digital news content in this period: The Sun, Mail Online, The Independent, The Guardian, Express, Mirror and The Telegraph. The outlets were selected on the basis of having the highest online audience figures in the period April 2019 to March 2020, with a total daily reach of 41 million. We also analysed the digital news content of two key broadcast outlets: BBC and ITV. While many news platforms were not part of this research and we cannot therefore claim to present a fully comprehensive picture, the huge online reach of the nine selected outlets (likely to have been even higher during the Covid-19 lockdown when fewer people were buying print newspapers, consuming their news online instead) means that we can reveal significant insights into UK media coverage of migration in this period.

Our research covers the period 1 March to 31 May 2020. In the context of the UK, this period captures the arrival proper of the Covid-19 pandemic, its first peak and accompanying national lockdown, followed by a period where the initial shock had arguably worn off. When we took the decision to conduct the research in early April, we envisaged the first two or three weeks of our selected period as allowing us to see coverage of migration and migrants in the UK while Covid-19 was a disease occurring mainly overseas. It was important to then assess coverage during the springtime height of the pandemic, with all its surrealism and uncertainty, as well as a short period after this.

Each outlet was analysed once a week, with all articles from that week featuring the following search terms logged: "migration", "migrant(s)", "refugee", "asylum seeker", "EU citizen(s)", "EU national(s)", "immigrant", "immigration". Articles where the main focus was not migration-related, or did not contain an explicit link to the UK, were not analysed in depth, but were logged. The remaining articles were then carefully analysed against various parameters, including whether they were Covid-19 related and whether they included a migrant voice (here, we refer specifically to the inclusion of migrants whose lived realities reflect the subject matter of the article, rather than a representative from an organisation who is a migrant, for example). Other parameters included whether the article reported on or featured a call for policy change.

Importantly, we also identified key 'frames' that broadly summarise the main approaches in categorising and defining migrants, and categorised articles according to these frames. We identified at least one frame in most articles, though several displayed more than one and some none at all. In political debate, frames are a tool for giving meaning to issues and topics, and as such are vital for building arguments. Our choice of frames was partially inspired by previous research on migration and media in the UK that has identified a broad tendency to portray migrants as victims, villains or heroes (see [here](#) for example). We adapted this framework to suit the Covid-19 context and as such formulated four key frames:

- 'Disadvantaged': Broadening the concept of the migrant as 'victim', we used the frame 'Disadvantaged' to capture all articles that portrayed migrants as negatively affected, either directly or indirectly, by the pandemic.
- 'Threats': The threat of the foreigner or Other is a well-known trope, often appearing in relation to disease, criminality or social instability. It became apparent during the early stages of the pandemic that this period would be no exception.
- 'Heroes': Though there had previously been recognition that migrants play an important role in public life, Covid-19 and its foregrounding of 'key workers' renewed and amplified that perception, to the point that key workers, many of whom are migrants, were heralded as heroes of the nation.

- 
- 'One of us': This frame refers to the idea of Covid-19 as a 'great leveller', a disease that does not discriminate in its victims. Times of crisis also often bring potential for displays of solidarity. We therefore felt that there was potential for media outlets to frame migrants in terms of the humanity they have in common with non-migrants.

## LIMITATIONS

We recognise limitations with the methodology, as there are with every piece of research. These limitations are largely due to the qualitative nature of the research. While analysing articles across the various outlets, we were faced with decisions that required a level of subjective interpretation. Deciding whether or not an article's main focus was migration-related is a case in point. An article about domestic violence, for example, may spend some time exploring the particular issues faced by migrant victims, even if it does not seem the main motivation behind the article was the experiences of migrants. To mitigate this, we worked throughout the data collection process to ensure this process was as standardised as possible.

We also acknowledge that our chosen search terms will not have returned all migration-related articles from this period. This is due to a number of factors. Certain journalists may choose not to engage with terms such as 'migrant' or 'refugee', or may simply not see someone's background as relevant to the article. There are also a number of other terms that could be used to describe migrants, such as 'foreign' or 'French-born', and these articles will not feature in our data or analysis.

Finally, it is important to note that our frames are not intended as comprehensive. Some articles therefore will not fall into any of the frames that we outline. Rather, they provide a broad and imperfect structure for analysing how most but not all media articles present migrants and migrant experiences.

The data and analysis presented in the report were selected to represent the findings of this research, factoring in the limitations outlined in this section.



# QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

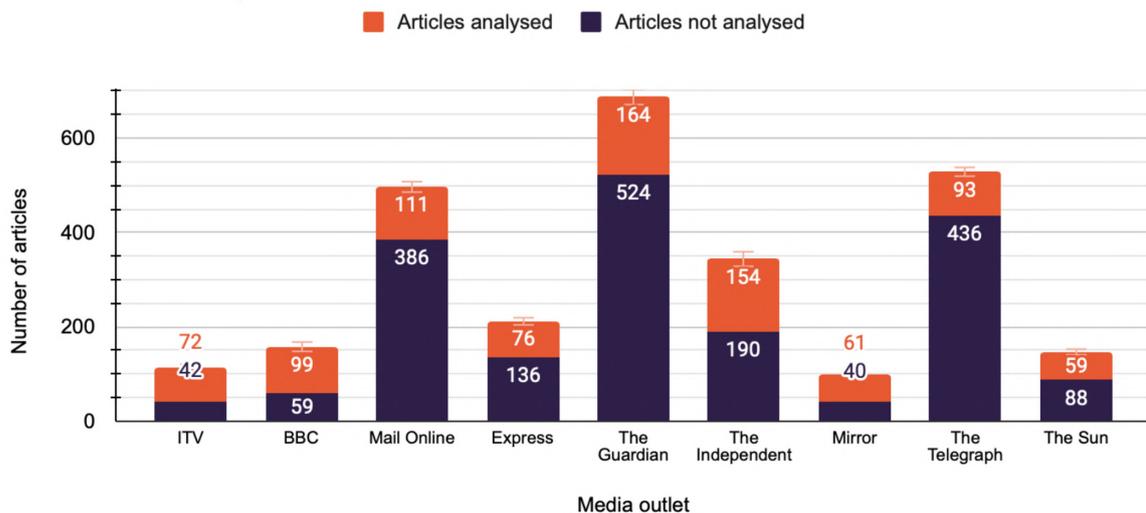
## TOTAL NUMBER OF ARTICLES

In total across all outlets 2,786 articles were published during the research timeframe that contained references to migrants or migration. Of these, 889 articles (about 32%) were selected for analysis, as the main focus of the article was related to migrants or migration in a UK context.

As shown in the graph below, the largest number of total articles were found in the Mail Online, The Telegraph and The Guardian, at 497, 529 and 688 respectively. However, the largest number of analysed articles came from the Mail Online, The Independent and The Guardian at 111, 154 and 164 respectively. The two broadcast outlets yielded a relatively low number of articles in total, which can perhaps be ascribed to the fact that online news articles form only a small part of their news output, which is focused on TV news (for ITV) and TV and radio news (for BBC).

### Articles researched

Total articles vs. analysed articles



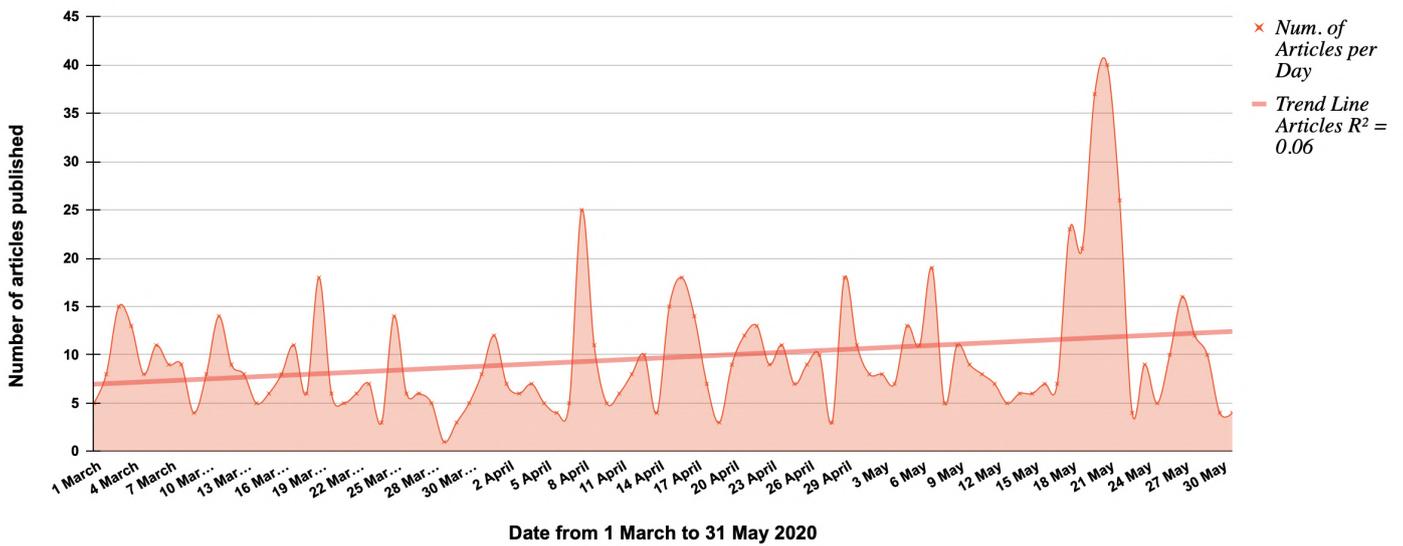
## NUMBER OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED PER DAY

The graph below shows the number of articles - out of the 889 analysed - published each day during the research timeframe. The red line is a trend line indicating the general trajectory of the daily points plotted.

During this three-month period there was one large peak in the number of relevant articles published per day, with 21 May as the day when the largest number of articles were published (40). The days immediately before and after were also high with 37 and 26 respectively. A smaller, more confined, peak occurred on 8 April, with 25 relevant articles published.

There were a number of smaller peaks, which saw 15-20 relevant articles published on a particular day.

## Articles published per day: 1 March - 31 May 2020



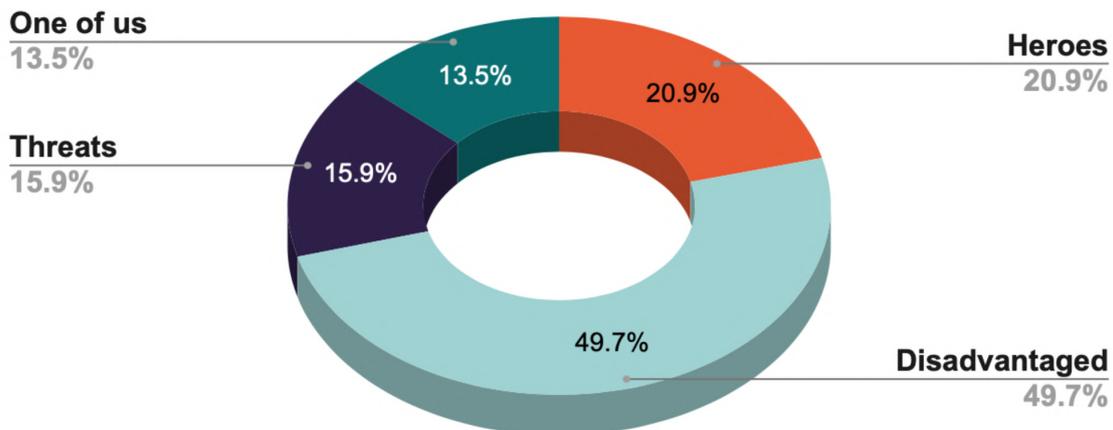
## FRAME FREQUENCY

Four frames were used to analyse the articles during research: 'One of Us', 'Heroes', 'Threats', and 'Disadvantaged'. Researchers had the option to identify one frame, multiple frames or no frames at all. When a frame was not identified, it means that the article did not fall into any of the four frames. Due to this and to some articles having multiple frames, the total number of frames identified differs from the number of articles analysed. At least one frame was identified in 423 of the analysed articles.

The pie chart below represents the number of times a frame was selected during research. The 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified most frequently, at 49.7%, and was selected more than twice as often as any of the other three frames. The 'Heroes' frame accounted for 20.9% of frames identified, with 'Threats' at 15.9% and 'One of Us' at 13.5%.

### Frame frequency

Each frame as a proportion of the total number of times a frame was identified



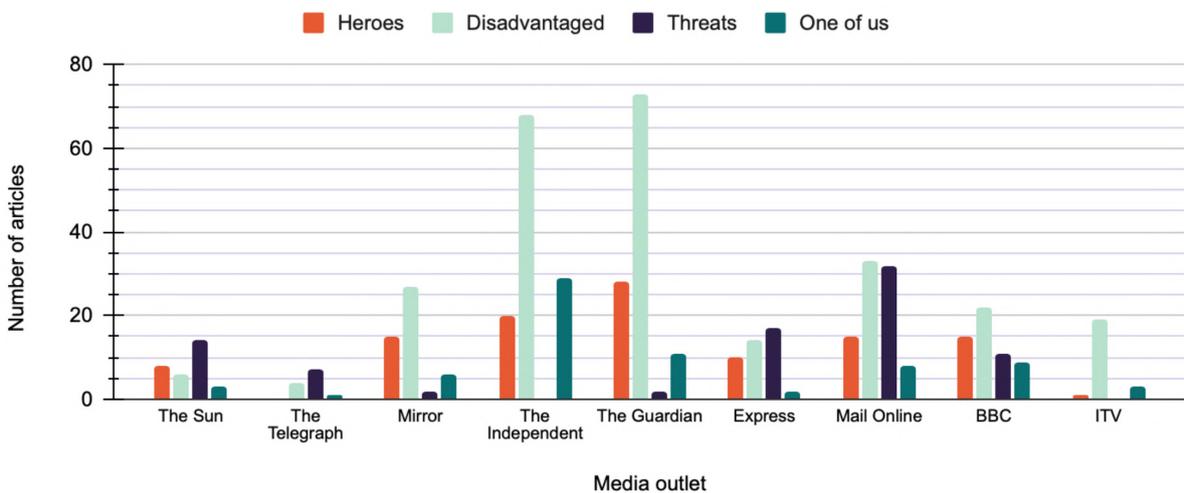
## FRAMES PER OUTLET

The graph below illustrates the number of frames identified per outlet. We saw in the graph above that the 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified most frequently and this is reflected below, where we can see that in two-thirds of the outlets the 'Disadvantaged' frame was the most common. The exceptions are the Express, The Telegraph and The Sun, where the 'Threats' frame was the most common.

The Independent and The Guardian both had substantially higher numbers of articles in the 'Disadvantaged' frame at 68 and 73 respectively, compared to the other frames.

### Frames per outlet

Number of times each frame was identified in each outlet

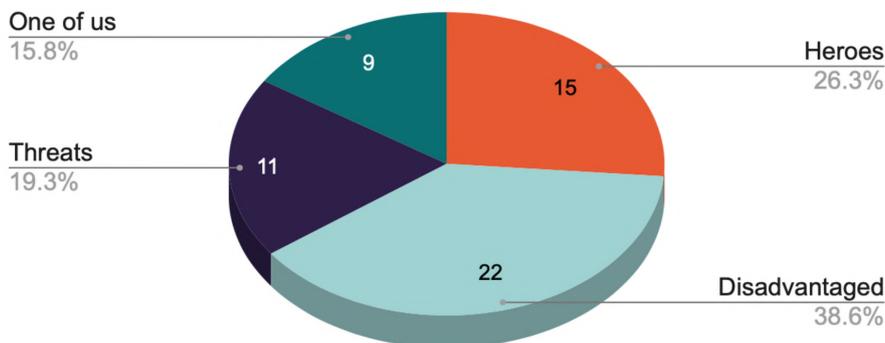


The graphs below present the data from the graph above in the form of pie charts, showing the number and percentage of instances that each frame was identified for each outlet and allowing us to look at these ratios more closely.

The first outlet represented is the BBC. In this outlet the 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified the most frequently at 38.6% (22 instances). The second most common frame was 'Heroes' at 26.3% (15 instances).

### Frames in BBC

Percentage of each frame found in BBC analysis

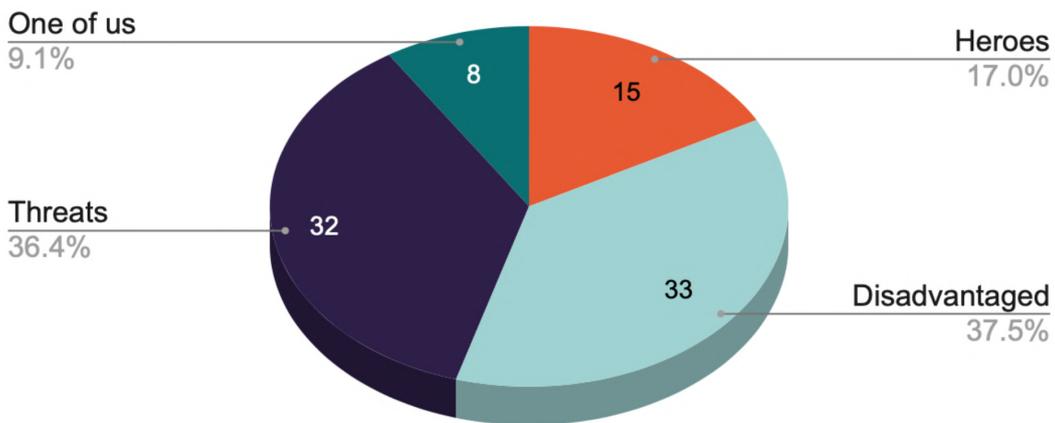


The graph below depicts the frames identified in the Mail Online. Similar to the BBC, the frame with the highest number of instances is the 'Disadvantaged' Frame at 37.5% (33 instances). However, unlike the BBC the second highest is not the 'Heroes' frame, but is instead the 'Threats' frame at 36.4% (32 instances).

The 'Disadvantaged' frame and the 'Threats' frame account for more than two-thirds of the total frames identified in the Mail Online.

### Frames in Mail Online

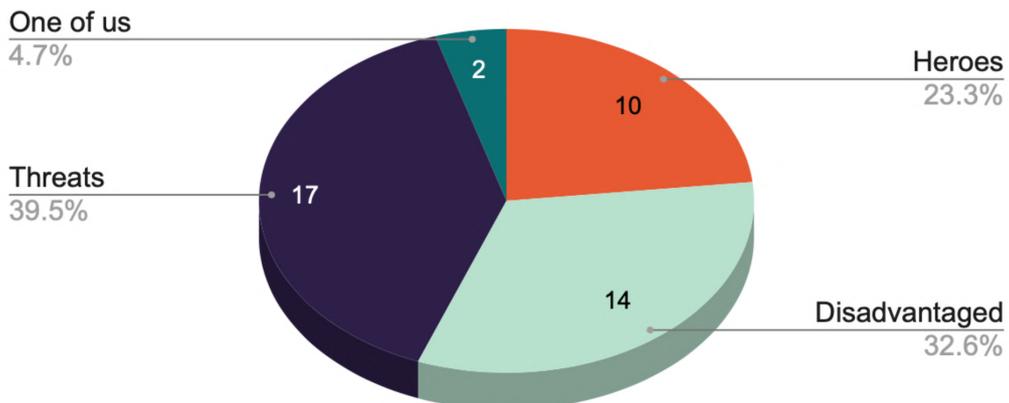
Percentage of each frame found in Mail Online analysis



The graph below shows the frames identified in the Express. Similar to the Mail Online, the most common frame here was 'Threats' at 39.5% (17 instances) and the second highest was 'Disadvantaged' at 32.6% (14 instances). The 'Threats' frame together with the 'Disadvantaged' frame again make up more than two-thirds of the total number of frame instances selected for the Express.

### Frames in Express

Percentage of each frame found in Express analysis

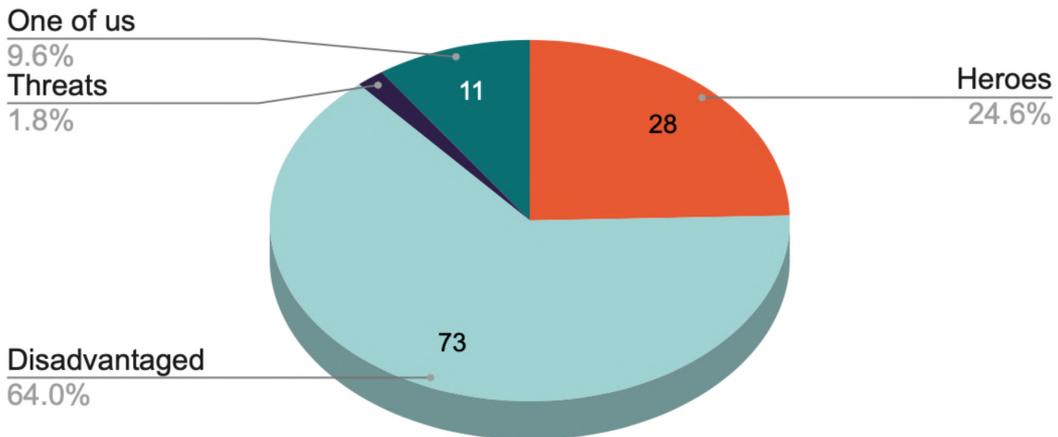


The graph below shows the frames identified in The Guardian. The 'Disadvantaged' frame was overwhelmingly identified at 64% (73 instances). Similar to the BBC, the second highest was the 'Heroes' frame at 24.6%.

The 'Threats' frame was rarely identified, with just one instance of this occurring. This is unlike the Mail Online and the Express where the 'Threats' frame was either the most or second most common frame identified.

### Frames in The Guardian

Percentage of each frame found in The Guardian analysis

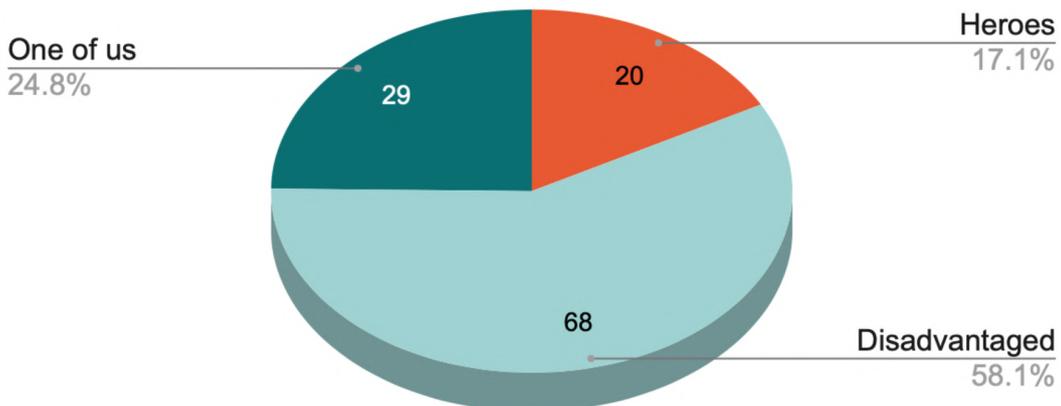


The graph below shows the frames identified in The Independent. The most striking finding is that the 'Threat' frame was not identified in any articles in this outlet.

However, similar to several other outlets, the 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified the most compared to the other frames at 58.1% (68 instances). The 'Heroes' frame and the 'One of Us' frame were both identified frequently at 17.1% (20 instances) and 24.8% (29 instances) respectively.

### Frames in The Independent

Percentage of each frame found in The Independent analysis

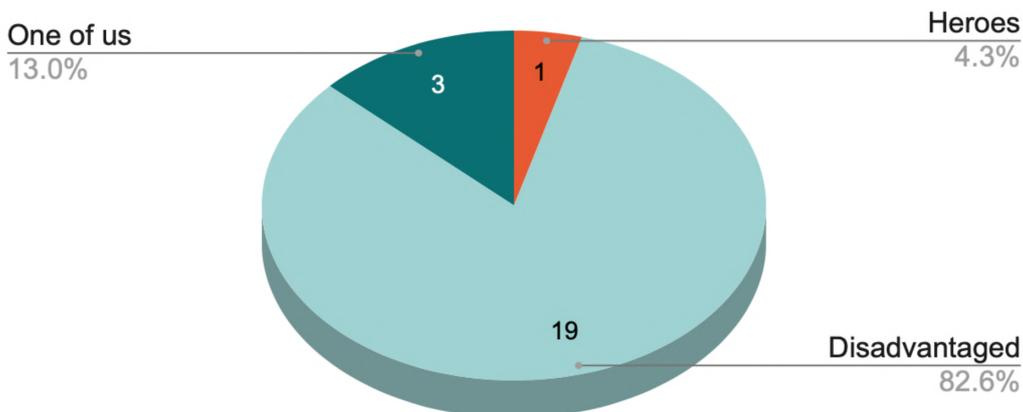


The graph below illustrates the frames identified in ITV articles. As with The Independent above, the 'Threats' frame was not identified in any articles in this outlet. Following the trend of most outlets, the 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified most frequently, at 82.6% (19 instances), a higher percentage than in any other outlet.

The other frames selected were 'Heroes' and 'One of Us' at 4.3% (1 instance) and 13% (3 instances) respectively.

### Frames in ITV

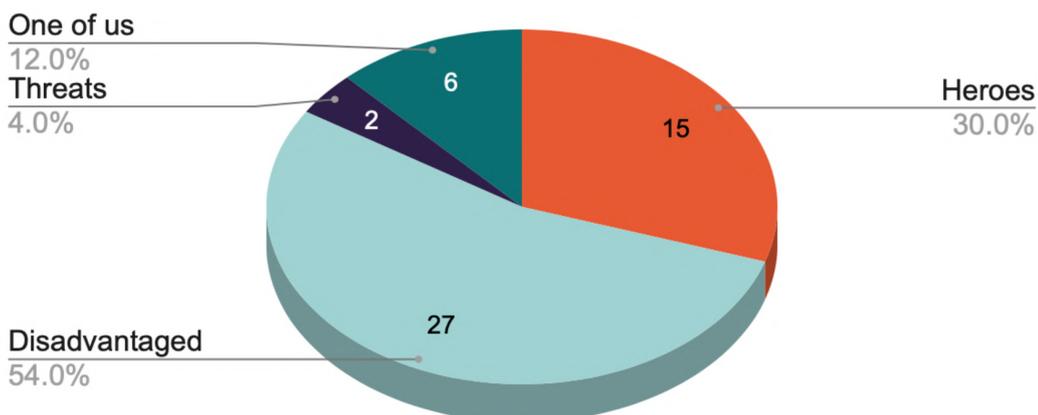
Percentage of each frame found in ITV analysis



The graph below illustrates the frames identified in the Mirror. Again, the 'Disadvantaged' frame was the most commonly identified at 54% (27 instances). The second most frequently identified frame was the 'Heroes' frame at 30% (15 instances).

### Frames in Mirror

Percentage of each frame found in Mirror analysis

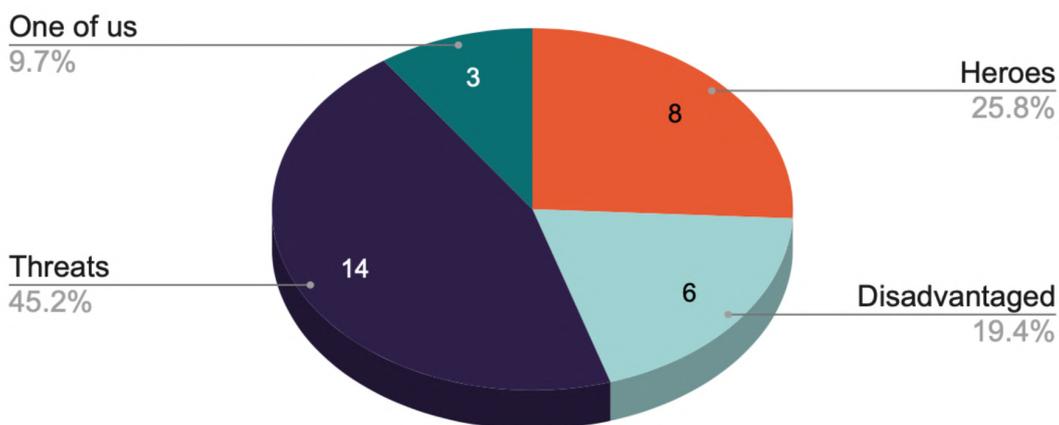


The next graph shows the frames identified in articles in The Sun. The most frequently selected frame was the 'Threats' frame at 45.2% (14 instances). The second most frequent was the 'Heroes' frame at 25.8% (8 instances).

Unlike many of the other outlets (including The Sun's main competitors in the tabloid market - the Express and Mail Online), the 'Disadvantaged' frame was not identified the most frequently and instead it is the 'Threats' and 'Heroes' frames that make up the vast majority of frames identified in The Sun.

### Frames in The Sun

Percentage of each frame found in Sun analysis

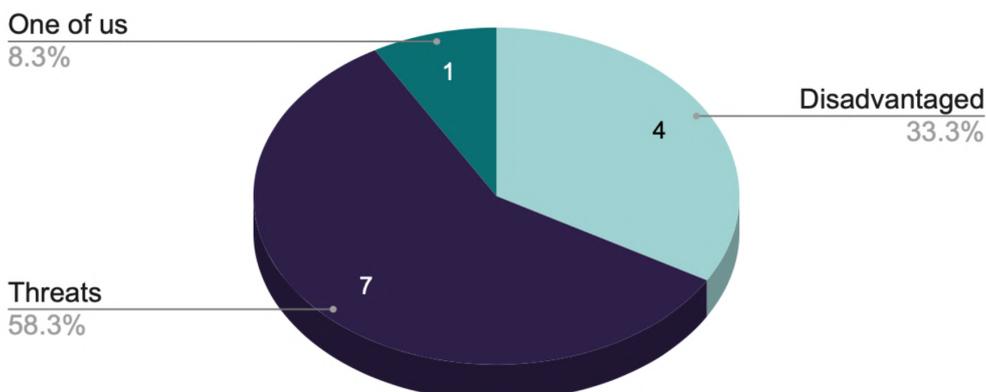


The graph below shows the number of instances a frame was identified when analysing The Telegraph, far fewer than in any other outlet (just 12 times in total).

The frame with the highest number of instances in The Telegraph was the 'Threat' frame at 58.3% (7 instances). The 'Disadvantaged' frame was second highest at 33.3% (4 instances, with 'One of Us' selected just once, 8.3%) and the 'Heroes' frame not at all. This last point is particularly notable, given the significant presence of this frame in most other outlets.

### Frames in The Telegraph

Percentage of each frame found in The Telegraph analysis



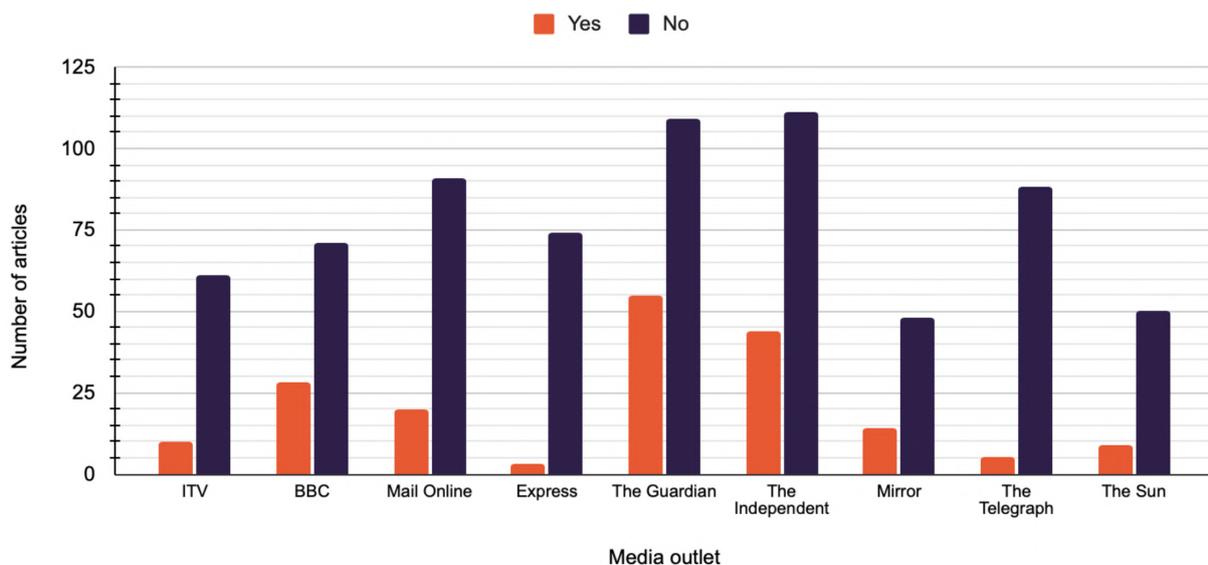
---

## MIGRANT VOICES IN ARTICLES

During analysis, researchers collected data on whether or not articles contained a migrant voice. As noted in the previous chapter, the article was counted as having a migrant voice if someone was quoted whose lived reality reflects the subject matter of the article.

Across all outlets, 21% of articles included a migrant voice. The graph below shows that the highest number and proportion of articles that did include a migrant voice were found in The Guardian and The Independent with 55 and 44 articles respectively. The same outlets also had the highest number of articles that did not include a migrant voice, with 109 and 111 respectively.

Migrant voices in articles



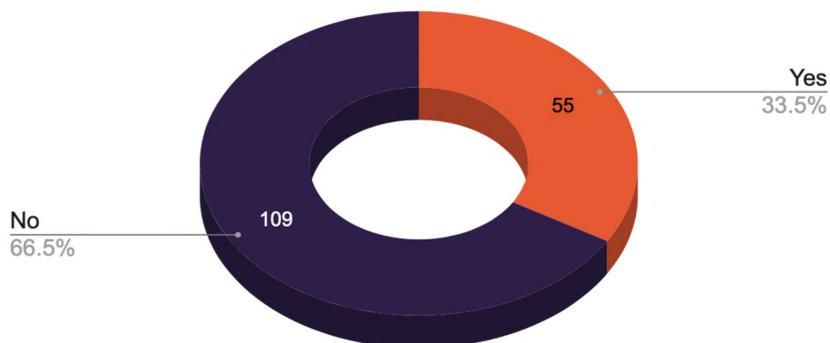
The two pie charts on the next page show the percentage of articles in The Guardian (164 analysed articles) and the Express (77 analysed articles) that did and did not include a migrant voice. As depicted, 33.5% (or 55 articles) in The Guardian included a migrant voice and 66.5% (or 109 articles) did not include a migrant voice. With around one-third of articles including a migrant voice, The Guardian was the news outlet with the highest proportion in this category.

The Express shows the opposite end of the spectrum with the lowest number (3) and percentage (3.9%) of articles that include a migrant voice. Over 96% of the analysed articles from the Express do not include a migrant voice.

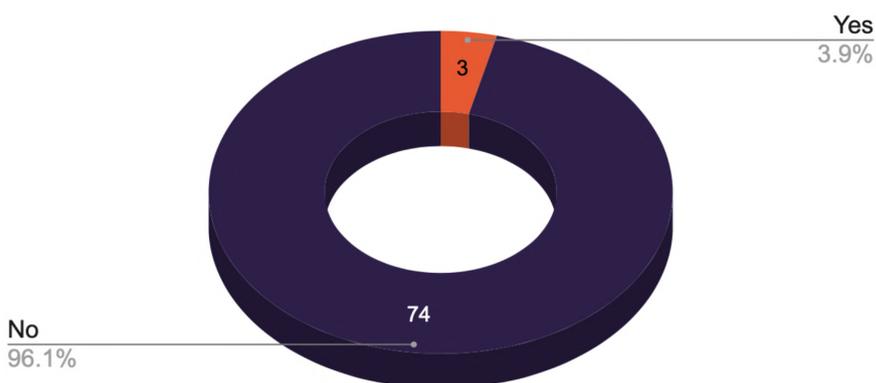
It is clear that there is a large difference in the frequency with which migrant voices are included in articles, depending on the news outlet.

---

## Migrant voices in The Guardian



## Migrant voices in Express



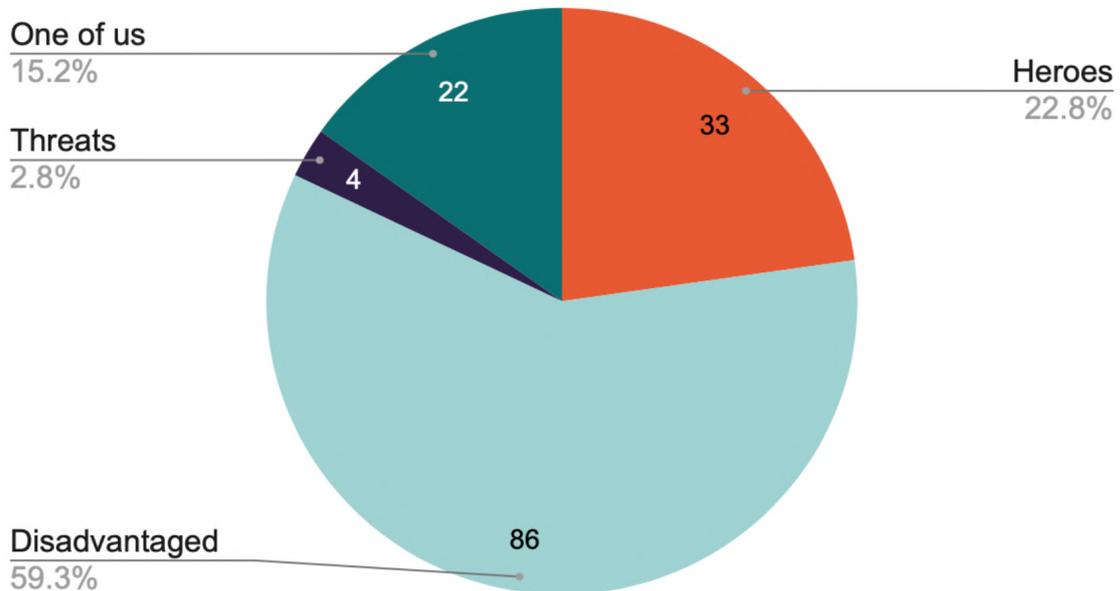
## MIGRANT VOICES PER FRAME

The following charts give us further information about the frequency with which migrant voices were included in the articles analysed. It is important to note that a frame was not identified for every article and that more than one frame was identified in some articles. This means that the total number of instances where a frame was identified does not correlate with the total number of articles analysed.

The pie chart on the next page shows a breakdown of the articles that included a migrant voice, divided by frames identified. By far the highest percentage of articles that included a migrant voice were categorised as using the 'Disadvantaged' frame, at 59.3% (86 articles). The 'Heroes' frame was the second highest at 22.8% (33 instances) and 'One of Us' was the third ranked at 15.2% (22 instances). The lowest percentage of instances fell under the 'Threats' frame with only 2.8% (4 instances).

---

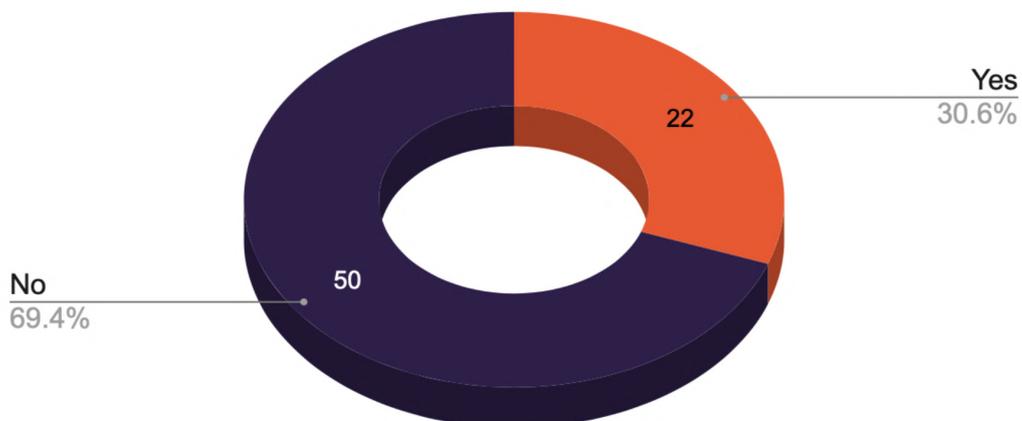
## Articles with migrant voices broken down by frame



The following charts depict the percentage of articles that did and did not include migrant voices, broken down by frame. Where the chart above is potentially skewed by the high number of total articles that were identified within the 'Disadvantaged' frame, the charts below allow us to see more accurately the frequency with which migrant voices were included within different frames.

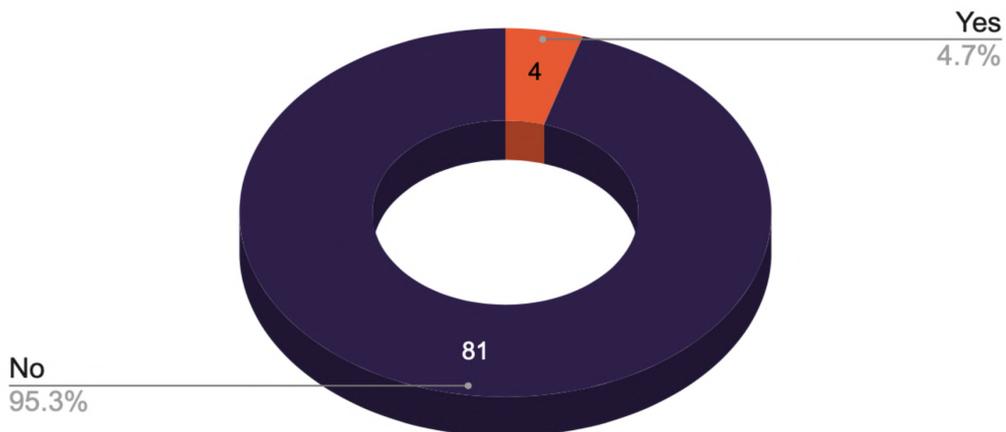
The first chart depicts the 'One of Us' frame. The percentage of articles with this frame that did not include a migrant voice was more than two-thirds of the total number of articles analysed in this frame, at 69.4% (50 articles). The percentage of articles that did include a migrant voice and categorised under the 'One of Us' frame was 30.6% (22 articles).

### Migrant voices in 'One of us' frame



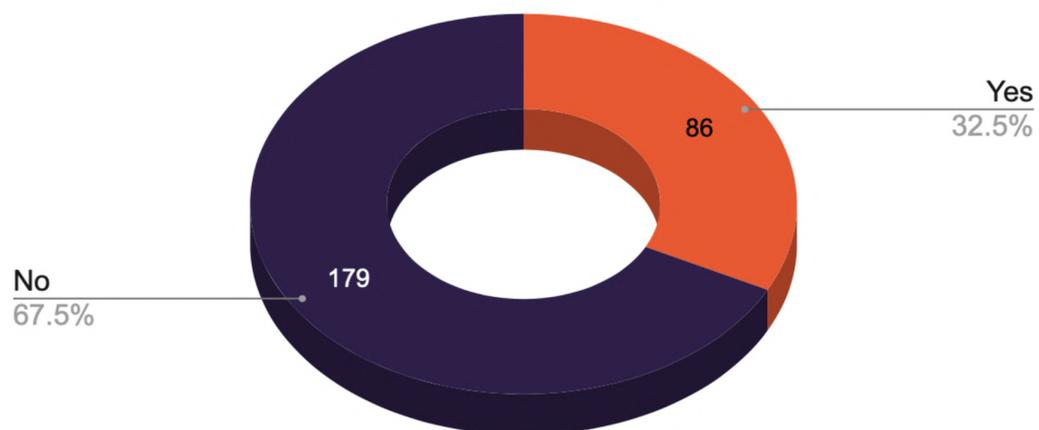
The chart below shows the number of articles that did and did not include a migrant voice within the 'Threats' frame. It is clear to see that only a very small number of the articles identified with this frame did include a migrant voice - just 4 in total (4.7%). Conversely, 95.3% of articles (81) in the 'Threats' frame did not include a migrant voice.

### Migrant voices in 'Threats' frame



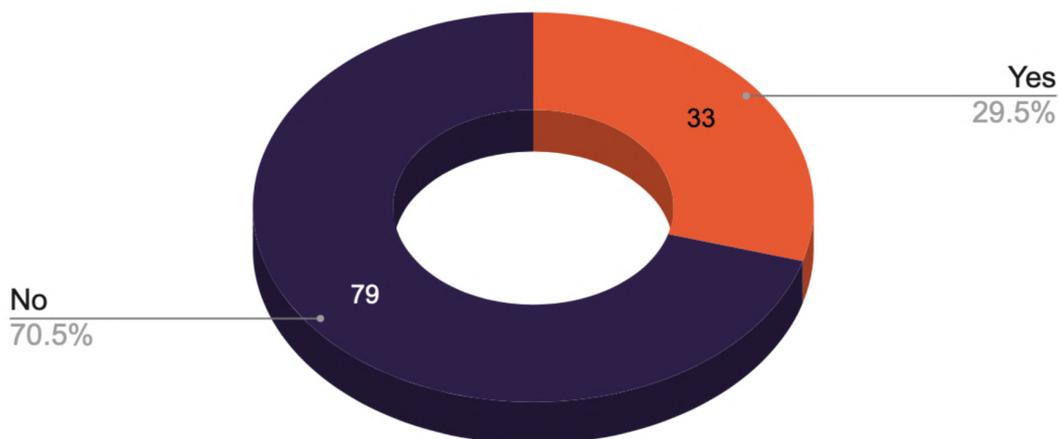
The next chart shows the number of articles that did and did not include a migrant voice categorised using the 'Disadvantaged' frame. More than two-thirds - 67.5% (179 articles) - did not include a migrant voice, while the remaining 32.5% (86 articles) categorised under the 'Disadvantaged' frame did include a migrant voice. This frame was identified by far the most frequently of all four frames (265 times).

### Migrant voices in 'Disadvantaged' frame



The graph below shows the percentage of articles that did and did not include a migrant voice that were also categorised under the 'Heroes' frame. More than two-thirds - 70.5% (79 articles) - did not include a migrant voice, whereas 29.5% (22 articles) did include a migrant voice.

### Migrant voices in 'Heroes' frame



## REPORTING ON OR CALLING FOR POLICY CHANGE

For each article analysed, researchers noted whether it reported on a policy change or included a call for policy change. For example, where an article included a quotation from or paraphrased an individual or organisation calling for automatic visa extensions for NHS workers, this article was recorded as featuring a call for policy change. Where an article reported on the Government announcement that visas would indeed be extended for (some) NHS workers, this article was recorded as reporting on a policy change. We were interested in finding out if there was a relationship between the calls reported on with highest frequency and the policy changes implemented (and reported on).

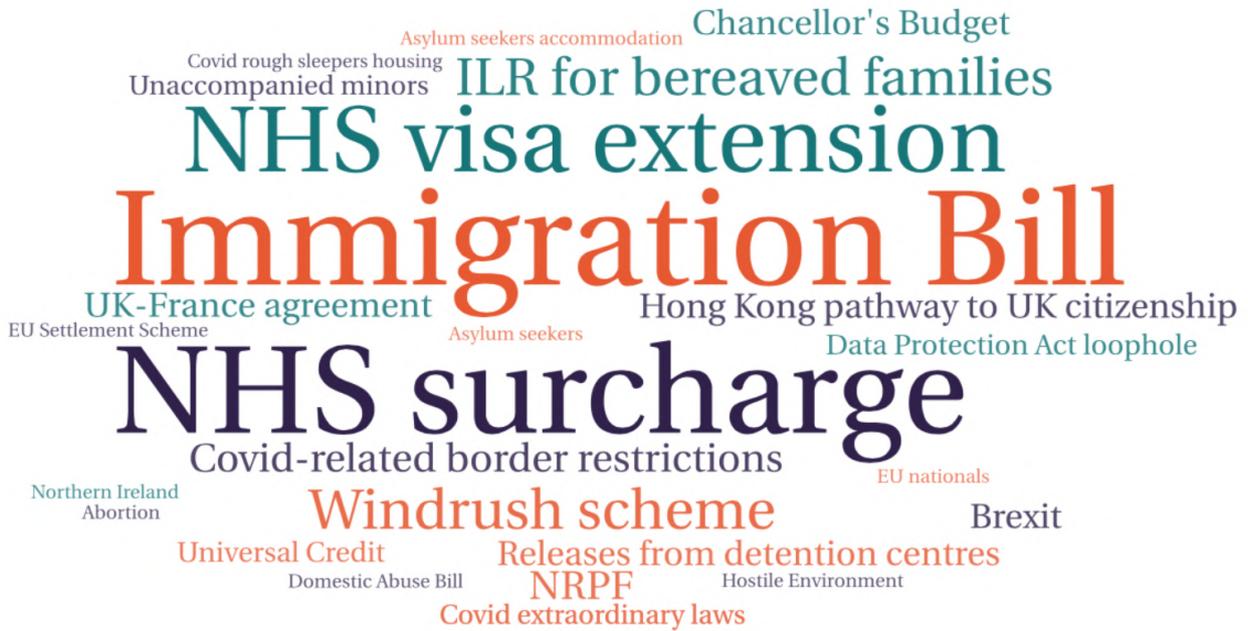
In both cases we noticed that a few topics dominated, as shown by the word clouds below. The first word cloud shows all the topics identified in articles that reported on policy changes, with the relative size of each phrase determined by the frequency of its appearance. For example, a policy change relating to “asylum seekers accommodation” was reported on just once, while the Immigration Bill was reported on 46 times.

The other two areas of policy change most frequently reported on were the International Health Surcharge (IHS) - the then £400/year, now £624/year, fee paid by the majority of migrants to use the NHS - at 39 times, and the decision to extend the visas of some NHS workers (22 times). Together, policy changes related to the NHS were by far the most commonly reported on within our dataset.

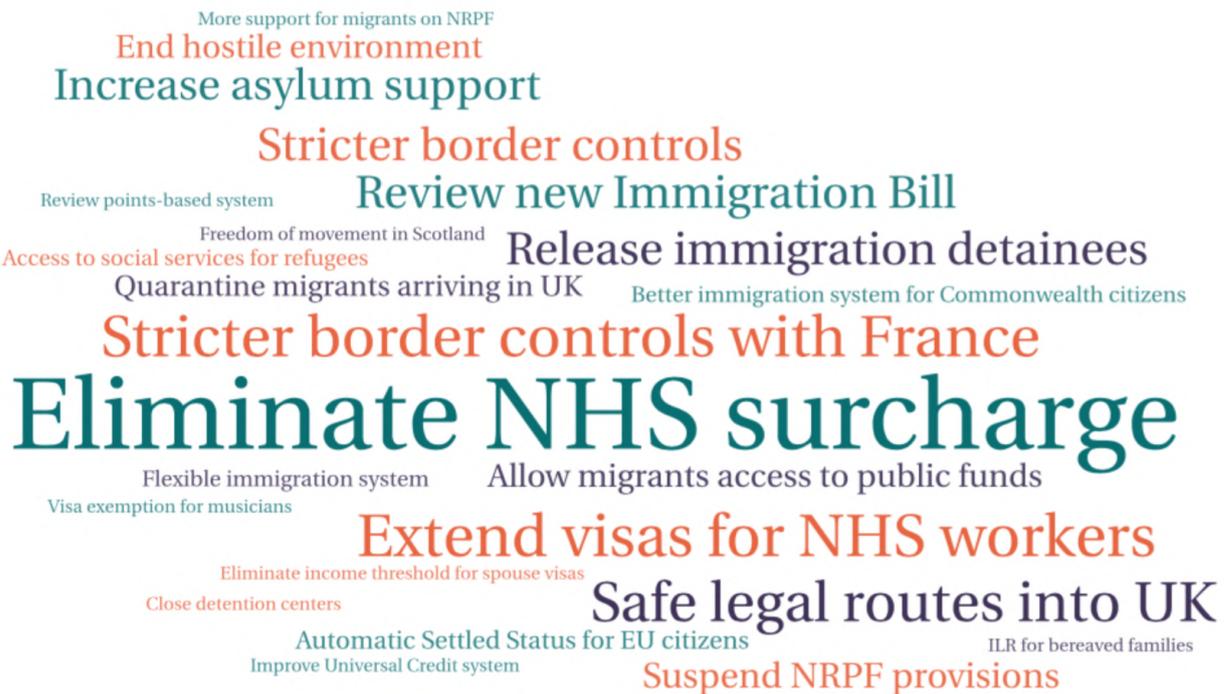
Other policy changes reported on multiple times included the Windrush scheme (8 instances), the decision to grant Indefinite Leave to Remain to migrant families bereaved by Covid-19 (7 instances), Covid-related border restrictions (4 instances) and changes regarding the No Recourse to Public Funds condition on many migrants’ visas (also 4 instances). There are some topics in the word cloud that are not directly related to migration: in these cases, the article was reporting on the particular impact on migrant groups of this policy change.

---

**POLICY CHANGES REPORTED ON**



**POLICY CHANGES CALLED FOR**



---

Of the 889 articles analysed, 223 included a call for policy change. The second word cloud above shows the calls that appeared in more than one article. In addition to those shown in that word cloud, there were 42 policy calls that appeared only once.

Again, the most common policy area under discussion concerned the NHS. A total of 66 articles called for a policy change in NHS-related contexts. In 49 cases, articles included a call for the IHS to be eliminated (most often only for NHS workers), whereas 17 articles included a call for visa extensions for NHS workers. In both cases, policies were later introduced that did indeed eliminate the IHS for NHS workers and extend NHS workers' visas.

Other calls were directed towards keeping migrants out of Britain rather than introducing helpful policies for those already in the UK. Sixteen articles included a call for the Government to adopt a stricter agreement with France on migrant Channel crossings and a further 10 included a broader call for stricter border controls in general. Conversely, 15 articles included a call for the Government to create more safe, legal routes into the UK and a further 10 where we found a call for the Government to review the Immigration Bill, which will make it harder for many migrants to come to the UK.

Other frequent calls included: releasing immigration detainees during Covid-19 (10); increasing the level of financial support for asylum seekers during the pandemic (9); temporarily suspending the No Recourse to Public Funds condition (6) and, relatedly, allowing migrants access to public funds (5); ending the hostile environment (5).



---

# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

## PEAKS IN COVERAGE

Two key peaks in coverage of migrants and migration are identifiable from our data, which can be loosely categorised as 8-9 April and 18-22 May. These are the periods in which our search terms occurred with most frequency.

### THE FIRST PEAK

The peak in coverage on 8-9 April was largely driven by renewed interest in the deaths of 39 migrants, found in the back of a refrigerated lorry in Essex in October 2019. On 8 April reports emerged that the lorry driver had pleaded guilty to manslaughter on 39 counts, attracting renewed media attention to the case. This news was covered during this period by all outlets bar The Independent. Other topics during this short peak included the Channel crossings, reported on by the Mail Online and BBC, as well as the death of a migrant doctor as a result of Covid-19.

The deaths of the migrants in Essex was one of few major stories unrelated to the pandemic that received significant media coverage in this period. When many news outlets and journalists were focusing on Covid-related matters, and when this was also the focus of most readers' attention, it is particularly interesting to note which stories beyond Covid-19 were considered to 'meet the bar' for editors assigning work to their staff. In the case of the lorry deaths, this was likely a result of the extensive coverage the matter had initially received in October 2019, when the shocking nature of the event grabbed the nation's attention and dominated the airwaves and column inches for days.

In the coverage on 8-9 April 2020, most outlets reported on the new developments - the lorry driver's guilty plea - in a matter-of-fact tone with little additional information, analysis or context. This was perhaps due to the pressure created within newsrooms by Covid-related issues in this period. The Mail Online's coverage (*"Lorry driver Maurice Robinson, 25, pleads guilty to manslaughter of 39 Vietnamese migrants"*) was a notable exception, going into much greater depth and conveying a great deal of sympathy for the Vietnamese nationals who lost their lives.

For example, its report not only addresses the driver's guilty plea, but offers considerable background information, including details about Vietnam and a list of all the individuals who died: their name, age, and the province from which they came. The article features several photographs of the victims (taken while still alive), the effect being to humanise those found dead in Essex - to put a face to what would otherwise be an anonymous, foreign group. In this instance, a clear victim framing is perceivable. Perhaps understandably, the migrants are portrayed as casualties of misfortune and ill-treatment, coming from "poverty-stricken" Vietnam before being exploited by an alleged people-smuggling ring.

It is interesting to contrast this article with the Mail Online's reporting on migrant Channel crossings, (*"Border force stops 130 migrants in a week at sea and NONE are being tested for coronavirus"*) published on the same day and written by the same journalist. The outlet reports that "130 migrants have arrived in four days, bringing the total to 630 this year", focusing closely on the numbers, the illegality of the crossing and the possibility that those arriving could have Covid-19, and giving voice to Dover MP Natalie Elphicke who, in an archetypal use of the 'migrant as threat' trope, suggests that these individuals are "break[ing] into Britain". No mention is made of the lack of safe, legal routes for these people, nor the fact that migrants who claim asylum after crossing a border are not considered to have entered illegally or irregularly.

---

While the headline for the story about the Vietnamese nationals draws attention to the fact that many were teenagers and that the temperature in the lorry “dipped as low as -25C”, there is no such attention to the potential vulnerability of those crossing the Channel or to the freezing temperatures they may have experienced. There is no sympathy, no attempt to humanise the individuals, or allow their stories to be heard. Rather, they are voiceless, faceless and nameless - anonymous by all measures aside from distant photos of their interactions with Border Force, and a brief mention of their countries of origin.

Given that these two articles were published on the same day and written by the same journalist, this discrepancy raises interesting questions about how the UK media and the Mail Online in particular approach the subject of migrants and migration. Understandably, the lorry deaths were a comparatively isolated media event (although smuggling or trafficking of this kind is widespread, it is rarely visible). Channel crossings, on the other hand, have been a staple component of the media landscape, especially since 2015. A number of studies, such as [Parker \(2015\)](#), have concluded that refugees and migrants are often constructed using discourses of criminality, invasion and threat by the UK media. It appears that, given that Channel crossings are part of a highly politicised narrative, the Mail Online in April continued the trend in using weighted discourse to report on refugee activity at the UK border. By contrast, those who entered the UK by less politically volatile routes and who, by nature of their deaths, could no longer be considered a threat, were discussed in far less hostile, even empathetic, terms. Such a comparison raises interesting questions surrounding how much, if any, sympathy is extended to certain subcategories of ‘migrants’, and how, even when two groups of migrants have entered the UK in a similar way and might be considered to occupy the same subcategory, reporting can diverge in such an extreme way.

## THE SECOND PEAK

The peak in coverage from 18 to 22 May was by far the largest, owing to a number of events and policy changes coinciding that drew significant media attention. In particular, the International Health Surcharge (IHS) and the Immigration Bill were frequent topics of interest. This was a busy period for migration in the media, as Boris Johnson at first defended the decision to continue charging NHS workers to use the NHS through the IHS despite pressure from the House of Commons, before announcing an unexpected U-turn. Meanwhile, the Government pushed its post-Brexit Immigration Bill, setting out to end free movement and adopt a much heralded ‘Australian-style points-based system’ for migrant workers. Reports of Channel crossings continued to feature during this period, and outlets also reported on the murder of 19-year-old Aya Hachem, originally from Lebanon, who was shot as she walked to a shop in Blackburn.

Reporting on the Immigration Bill fell largely along partisan lines. [The Sun](#) (*‘The Sun Says’*) openly welcomed the proposed legislation, stating that it is “exactly what Brexit-voting Sun readers wanted”. [The Express](#) avoided direct comment, but implicitly expressed its partiality, using its platform to repeat the Home Secretary’s remarks on the bill that were by their nature favourable, as well as giving voice to leading Brexiteer Nigel Farage, for whom the bill did not go far enough in restricting immigration (*‘Nigel Farage exposes flaw in new Brexit Immigration Bill’*). By way of contrast, [the Mirror](#), [The Guardian](#) and [The Independent](#) highlighted Shadow Home Secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds accusation of government “hypocrisy”, which tied the bill directly to Covid-19, utilising the pandemic and its celebration of key workers to emphasise that restrictive immigration policies may be detrimental to the UK workforce, as well as fundamentally undervaluing the contributions of those who earn less than the minimum income threshold.

---

Generally speaking, the liberal/left-leaning publications took the angle, if only implicitly, that key workers who had been hailed as heroes and applauded on a Thursday evening were the subjects of betrayal by the Government's bill. Although the Home Secretary promised a fast-track NHS visa to make it easier and quicker for medical professionals to work in the health service, this did little to placate the liberal/left-wing media as the measure seemingly signalled a value judgement on whose labour is deemed worthy, excluding those working in care, hospitality, food supply and construction, among other industries, all of whom commonly receive low pay.

During the same week the appropriateness of the IHS for NHS workers became ever more pertinent. The reality that nurses and carers were obliged to pay a £400 annual fee to access the NHS (which has since risen to £624), on top of contributions through tax, while also risking their lives on the frontline of the pandemic, became a subject of intense scrutiny. Initially, the Prime Minister defended the charge. However, his position soon became untenable, as leading Conservative MPs supported Labour's call to scrap the fees for health workers and media support for the fees fell away. Unlike the partisanship we saw in coverage of the Immigration Bill, coverage of the surcharge fell decidedly on the side of its abolition. Most outlets, in coherence with the public mood, reported on the charge as an injustice.

Unsurprisingly, the liberal/left-wing outlets were highly critical of Johnson's position. However, those on the right also berated the policy. For example, The Sun (*'Syrian filmmaker turned hospital cleaner blasts £624 IHS for migrant frontline health workers'*) spotlighted Hassan Akkad, a Syrian refugee, filmmaker and hospital cleaner whose impassioned pleas for Government support for migrant workers gained significant traction. The Sun endorsed his claim that the IHS is "inhumane" and was generally sympathetic to the difficulties he faced as an essential worker on an hourly wage of £8.50.

The Mail Online engaged in a similar narrative (*'From the Calais Jungle to rubbing shoulders with Hollywood A-listers...'*), also pitching Hassan Akkad as the voice of migrants' plight, a human face behind a policy that penalised migrant key workers. The only outlet that defended the Government's initial position was the Express (*'Are you serious? Labour's Ashworth dismantled by Hartley-Brewer in furious radio NHS row'*), quoting right-wing broadcaster and commentator Julia Hartley-Brewer, who argued for the charge by stating that "we've got to stop sanctifying people who are just doing their job". Though somewhat balanced in its appraisals, and quoting Labour's position, the Express appears as a notable exception for its refusal to outrightly criticise the IHS, and for refusing to engage explicitly with the popular narrative of 'NHS heroes'.

That media outlets on the right were for the most part sympathetic to calls to scrap the IHS is consistent with the general exaltation of migrant health workers - the same trend that prompted the nation's Thursday evening applause, as well as part of the rationale behind the distinction between NHS workers, who can 'fast track' their route to the UK under the Immigration Bill, and other ostensibly less valuable migrants.

In other words, the sense across the media landscape was that migrant health workers occupy a uniquely worthy and respectable position. Though certainly their contributions to the UK during and prior to the pandemic are admirable, the singling out of individual people and professions is potentially damaging to the overall perception of migrants and migration. It reinforces the idea that one must look, behave, and be a certain way to be perceived as a palatable migrant - one must meet specific criteria before being deemed worthy of a place in the UK. These ideas are discussed further in the Frames section, from p.28 onwards.

---

**Lorry driver Maurice Robinson, 25, pleads guilty to manslaughter of 39 Vietnamese migrants including ten teenagers found dead inside the back of his refrigerated truck where temperatures dipped as low as -25C**

*Mail Online, 8 April*

Why are a disproportionate number of Filipino healthcare workers dying of coronavirus?

*ITV, 24 April*

**STAY AND FIGHT** Visas for thousands of crucial doctors, nurses and paramedics extended until the end of the year, Priti Patel announces

*The Sun, 31 March*

**OPINION** Boris Johnson is prepared to applaud the NHS - and just as prepared to deport them after the coronavirus crisis is over

*Mirror, 1 April*

Despite PM's praise of nurses, it's Tory policies that made them suffer

*The Guardian, 13 April*

**FRUITCAKES!** Fury after 180 Romanian crop-pickers who flew into the UK were not tested for coronavirus

*The Sun, 19 April*

---

## FRAMES

### 'DISADVANTAGED'

From the onset of the first national lockdown, commentators and journalists began to draw attention to the social ramifications of the unprecedented measures used to stem the spread of the virus. Migrant and BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities were quickly perceived to be disproportionately disadvantaged, and reporting from *The Independent* and *The Guardian* reflected this. Particularly vulnerable were those migrants who by way of their visa conditions have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), and as such could not access state benefits to compensate for lost income. A further financially disadvantaged group were asylum seekers. Forced to live on £37.75 a week, a testing budget in 'ordinary' circumstances, asylum seekers saw their funds stretched further as the cost of essential items began to rise. *The Mirror* ('*Coronavirus: Mum struggling to live on £5 a day pleads for help as prices soar*') was one outlet that reported on the struggles of an asylum seeking mother and a charity's call to increase asylum support during the pandemic.

In addition to financial disadvantage, migrants and BAME communities were also recognised as being at higher risk of catching and dying from the virus. The Government report acknowledging this, 'COVID-19: understanding the impact on BAME communities', fell outside the timeframe of this research, although the trend was recognised before its publication.

### NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS

Some of the media outlets we analysed reported on the oversights or failings of Government support schemes and the impact on workers in the gig economy, and on sex workers, for example, domains where migrants make up a significant proportion (see here and here). Even more commonly reported was the detrimental impact of NRPF. Prior to the pandemic, NRPF restrictions were already pushing many working migrant families into poverty and precarity. However, when the Covid-19 outbreak hit and 'stay at home' became official Government guidance, many migrants were left unable to work for their income, and unable to access vital safety nets such as Universal Credit.

Other, less overt circumstances in which NRPF risked becoming even more problematic during the pandemic were raised by Shadow Immigration Minister Holly Lynch and reported on by *The Guardian* ('*Labour calls for end to migrant benefit block during coronavirus*'). For example, migrant domestic abuse victims were effectively shut out of refuge accommodation as many women's refuges rely on housing benefit. This coincided with fears that instances of domestic abuse would escalate as a result of lockdown. In this period, *The Independent* published a case-study style article ('*It was bad, but now it's been unbearable: The children going hungry during the pandemic*') highlighting the impact of NRPF on children who as a result of their parents' immigration status, were unable to access free school meal vouchers and therefore often went hungry. The ramifications of NRPF, brought to the fore by the pandemic, were both broad and specific, disadvantaging migrants in a range of ways.

The issue of NRPF gained further traction in the media following a meeting of the House of Commons Liaison Committee on 27 May in which the Prime Minister indicated that he was unaware of the status after being queried on the matter by the Labour Chair of the Department for Work and Pensions Select Committee, Stephen Timms. The Prime Minister conceded that "clearly people who have worked hard for this country and who live and work here should have support of one kind or another" and said that he would see what could be done to help.

---

This was reported on by [The Independent](#), [Mirror](#), [Express](#) and [The Guardian](#), with the [Mail Online](#) reporting on a plea to the Home Secretary by Dame Emma Johnson, encouraging her to rescind the policy. As with the issue of the International Health Surcharge for NHS workers, media across the political spectrum seemed united on this matter against the Government, although reporting did not reach the same level in terms of extent or fervour. In this case, the Prime Minister was able to quietly retreat from his promise to “see what we can do to help” and NRPF dropped off the political and media agenda for the most part, leaving the condition in place for many migrants with limited leave to remain. Nonetheless, this period did indicate a welcome willingness by media outlets across the political spectrum to engage with the struggle and destitution that many migrants face as a result of their ineligibility for public funds.

## COVID-19 AND BAME COMMUNITIES

Likewise, the media was eager in this period to engage with stories of migrants suffering health problems, and specifically the disproportionate number of people from migrant and BAME communities dying from Covid-19. For example, [ITV](#) published a short article (*‘Why are a disproportionate number of Filipino healthcare workers dying of coronavirus?’*) on 24 April looking at why Filipino healthcare workers appear to have been so vulnerable to the disease. Similarly, [the Mirror](#) ran a story about a Filipino nurse in critical care with Covid-19 (*‘A&E nurse who cared for coronavirus patients now critical in intensive care herself’*), and the [Mail Online](#) published a story listing 10 migrant NHS doctors who had lost their battle with the infection (*‘They came to join the NHS and made the ‘ultimate sacrifice’...’*). They were just a handful among numerous articles of a similar nature in various outlets.

There appears to have been widespread acknowledgement that those serving on the frontline of the pandemic were uniquely and disproportionately at risk - and disproportionately first or second generation migrants - and that long-standing inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic were also leading to higher death rates among migrant and BAME communities. Both of these factors were recognised by [Public Health England’s June report](#), although the media’s reporting brought this issue to the fore prior to that date. However, like that June report, there was little reporting that looked closely at what could be done to reduce the death rates among these communities or to tackle the entrenched inequalities that Covid-19 had exposed and exacerbated.

Instead, many reports of migrant NHS worker deaths, while emphasising how these migrants are ‘disadvantaged’, also took the approach of hailing them as heroes and praising their sacrifice (a framing we look at more closely in the next section). A consequence, whether intended or not, of this approach, is that the reader is left unaware of the context of or broader circumstances that may have led to their particular vulnerability and their possibly preventable death. For example, the previously mentioned ITV article refers to Filipino nurses as the “angels of the NHS”. The Mail Online article describes the doctors as “selfless” and “incredibly dedicated”, almost paying homage to them as martyrs and humanising them by displaying their photographs and printing words of sympathy from friends, family and colleagues. However, we learn nothing in these articles about their working conditions and the inequalities they faced as migrants and frontline workers.

---

## 'HEROES'

'Hero' is seldom a word used to describe migrants in UK media discourse. However, it was a word that became more frequent in media reporting during the first UK Covid-19 lockdown, with the 'Heroes' frame identified in 113 of the 889 analysed articles (second only to 'Disadvantaged', with 269 stories).

This concept was most often applied in relation to particular groups of migrant workers, most prominently NHS workers. However, there was also a divide between the frontline 'heroes' such as doctors and nurses and the hidden 'heroes' such as volunteers and cleaners. This divide was most apparent in events such as 'Clap for Our Carers' and Government policies to extend visas or eliminate the International Health Surcharge (IHS) for some groups of NHS workers. Research also showed that migrant agricultural workers were depicted as heroes during a time when a much-publicised 'UK Land Army' did not even nearly reach the 90,000 individuals needed on farms across the UK for a successful picking season.

## HEALTHCARE WORKERS

During the period covered by this research there was a significant shift in the way migrants were discussed and depicted in the media. In the early weeks, migrant healthcare workers - primarily doctors and nurses - were labelled as heroes because of their work on the frontline during the pandemic. This type of reporting was given a major boost when Johnson was treated by two migrant nurses during his stint in intensive care (discussed in the Peaks in coverage section on pp.24-26). Prior to this, a key trigger for the hero discourse was the Home Secretary's announcement of an automatic 12-month visa extension for doctors, nurses, paramedics and their families.

The Sun (*'Stay and fight: Visas for thousands of crucial doctors, nurses and paramedics extended until the end of the year, Priti Patel announces'*) quotes Priti Patel as she made the announcement and, without using the word 'heroes', implied that these migrants were doing extremely valuable work, saying: "Doctors, nurses and paramedics from all over the world are playing a leading role in the NHS's efforts to tackle coronavirus and save lives. We owe them a great deal of gratitude for all that they do."

However, just three days later, as 52 migrants were intercepted by the UK Border Force as they made the dangerous Channel crossing, a Home Office statement confirmed that the Home Secretary and her French counterpart had "reaffirmed their commitment to tackling this issue since the outbreak of coronavirus". This was fundamentally a commitment to stop people making the crossing using punitive measures rather than creating safe, legal routes. The statement was quoted in several news outlets, including the Mail Online (*'Border force rescues 53 people including Iraqi and Syrian nationals from the straits of Dover'*).

These two divergent reactions from the Home Secretary are emblematic of two wholly divergent attitudes towards particular categories of 'migrant'. Instead of being seen as human beings, NHS doctors and nurses are seen and valued only for the service they provide, while those arriving across the Channel are rejected as threats, with not even their potential service value acknowledged (after all, there are probably doctors, nurses and scientists among them). This tendency to view migrants in specific (but also shifting) categories, rather than as individual human beings, fuels and entrenches an existing good/bad migrant discourse. It's also important to note that cleaners, porters and other migrant health and care workers - many of whom faced an unbearably strenuous, stressful few months and a high risk of contracting Covid-19 - were left out of the visa extension scheme announced with fanfare by the Home Secretary (and, later, out of the IHS exemption, too). They were not deemed sufficiently 'good' or 'deserving'.

---

After the initial flurry of articles about the visa extension policy, few articles discussed the issue of migrant frontline NHS workers and even fewer criticised the Government for not extending the policy to health and care workers beyond doctors, nurses, and paramedics. However, there were a couple of interesting exceptions. This [Guardian](#) article (*'NHS heroes... and targets of racists'*) by columnist Sonia Sodha discusses the racism faced by NHS frontline workers on a daily basis, in the context of 'Clap for Our Carers' and the recent visa extension announcement, while this scathing [Mirror](#) article, (*'Boris Johnson is prepared to applaud the NHS - and just as prepared to deport them after the coronavirus crisis is over'*), also written by a columnist, targets the Government, arguing that "a one-year visa extension for medics is a slap in the face" when considering the extortionate IHS migrants must pay and the hostile environment they face every day.

Broadly, the focus of articles where the 'Heroes' frame was identified shifted in April to the migrant nurses who cared for the Prime Minister while he was in intensive care. However, not all coverage simply praised these migrant heroes; for example, this [Guardian](#) article (*'Despite PMS's praise of nurses, it's Tory policies that made them suffer'*) arguing that the issues many migrant healthcare workers face are the direct result of Conservative policies. A few weeks later, after [criticism](#) from MPs, media commentators and the public, the Prime Minister decided to scrap the IHS for (some) healthcare workers, one of the key policies criticised in The Guardian and Mirror articles mentioned here. Media coverage of this U-turn is addressed more closely in the 'Peaks in coverage' section above.

As a final point to note here, there were quite a few articles where both the 'Heroes' and the 'Disadvantaged' frame were identified, which initially is perhaps surprising. However, now that we have seen the focus in 'Heroes' articles on NHS workers - who were also a group most at risk of contracting and dying from Covid-19, and who, like many other migrants, are subject to extortionate visa fees and restrictive visa requirements - this overlap becomes more explicable. The UK's heroes during Covid-19 were also some of those most disadvantaged.

## OTHER ESSENTIAL WORKERS

The first Covid-19 lockdown saw an unprecedented focus on the vital work of migrants on the frontline of the NHS and some steps forward relating to policy, both of which were welcome developments. However, the attention of the public and policymakers was almost exclusively focused on doctors and nurses, excluding not only other healthcare workers, such as those in social care, but also millions of essential workers helping keep Britain running, many of them migrants.

First, the 'hidden heroes' of the NHS, keeping the UK's hospitals running from the back end - those who clean and ensure sanitary work areas for patients and nurses/doctors alike; those who run the cafeterias, work in administration or volunteer. The one story in this period that focused on these workers was the viral story of Hassan Akkad, a Syrian refugee who worked as a hospital cleaner during the pandemic, reported in this [Mail Online](#) article (*'From the Calais Jungle to rubbing shoulders with Hollywood A-listers...'*). (This story is discussed in more detail in the Migrant voices section on p.40.) A small number of other articles also mentioned the contribution of frontline workers beyond doctors and nurses, including this [Mirror](#) article (*'Fury as Priti Patel pushes immigration crackdown guide during coronavirus crisis'*), which quotes Shadow Home Secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds talking about the sacrifices made by supermarket staff and refuse collectors as well as nurses and carers. However, such articles were the exception, not the rule.

---

## AGRICULTURAL AND SEASONAL WORKERS

Later in the research period we saw publication of articles covering the need for migrant seasonal workers (see this [Guardian](#) example - *'Fruit and veg 'will run out' unless Britain charters planes to fly in agricultural workers from eastern Europe'*). Seasonal workers were called upon and privately flown in from Eastern Europe to utilise their skills on many farms throughout the UK, reported on by this [BBC](#) article (*'Eastern Europeans to be flown in to pick fruit and veg'*). However, this occurred only after a callout for a 'UK Land Army' was not as successful at recruiting long-term, skilled individuals willing to relocate to work on farms across the UK as the Government had hoped.

In this situation of near crisis, those being flown in were labelled by many news outlets as heroes, using their skills to ensure that farmers' fears of their crops rotting in the fields and communities' fears of a shortage of food did not become reality. This marked a shift in the rhetoric usually deployed against this group of migrants, conventionally treated with suspicion and often accused of "stealing British jobs". Whether this shift in perspective and coverage continues beyond the pandemic remains to be seen. However, as seen in the next section, there were also a significant number of articles about seasonal workers where the 'Threats' frame could be identified, leading us to believe that the shift in rhetoric was only partial at best.

As with articles about NHS workers, the 'Disadvantaged' frame was also often identified in articles about seasonal workers. This was usually due to a focus on their living conditions - small, shared accommodation - which left them vulnerable to contracting the virus.

---

## 'THREATS'

Migrant individuals are often cast as a 'threat' to local and national society throughout the world. This particular anti-migrant discourse not only continued but was given a narrower focus through the period under investigation, with migrants arriving across the Channel and agricultural/seasonal workers most often cast as threats. This frame was the most frequently identified in the Express, The Telegraph and The Sun, and the second most frequently identified (by just one) in the Mail Online. It is also important to mention that there were two outlets where the 'Threats' frame was not identified in any articles: ITV and The Independent.

We found that in almost 21% of articles where the 'Threats' frame was identified, the 'Disadvantaged' frame was also identified. This was partly due to anti-migrant Government discourse coinciding with awareness-raising efforts by NGOs over the particular impacts of the pandemic and the lockdown on migrant communities. For example, many articles about the Channel crossings focus on the illegality of the journey across the Channel, while also presenting these migrants as victims of gangs and people smugglers.

There were no significant intersections with other categories. The 'Threats' and 'One of us' frames were identified together in just one article and none at all where migrants were presented as both 'Threats' and 'Heroes', despite seasonal workers being the focus of a large number of articles in each category.

The majority of articles identified with a 'Threats' frame focus on the Channel crossings. Other topics included Covid-19 symptoms and diagnosis in asylum housing, migrants released from detention, migrants found in a lorry being tested for Covid-19, migrant agricultural workers not being tested for Covid-19 while taking jobs that could have gone to displaced British workers, and the passing of the Immigration Bill in the House of Commons.

## CHANNEL CROSSINGS

Just over half (54) of the 107 articles identified in the 'Threats' category focused on the Channel crossings. A further 10 looked at Nigel Farage's bid to make a documentary about migrants coming to the UK via the Channel (and arguably breaking lockdown rules himself in order to do so).

Most articles about the Channel crossings included the up-to-date number of individuals who had successfully made the crossing that day, that week, and even a total for the year in comparison to the previous year. These numbers were shared alongside statements from the Home Secretary and other Government officials. In the early weeks, alongside the usual insinuations that migrants arriving via this route are a threat to UK security, many articles gave voice to the anti-migrant view that those arriving across the Channel could be bringing Covid-19.

The first such article was published in the [Mail Online](#) on 17 March, (*'Border Force officers test 25 migrants for coronavirus after they were intercepted crossing the English Channel today'*). Significantly, this article utilises a quotation or statement from the head of the charity Care4Calais, intended to highlight the dreadful conditions of the migrant encampments in Calais and the high level of vulnerability of those living there to Covid-19, to strengthen the narrative of 'migrants = threats'. By starting the article with the news that new arrivals are being tested for Covid-19 and later dwelling on the fact that the camps in France have little or no running water and their inhabitants are unable to quarantine or socially distance, the journalist clearly guides the reader to the conclusion that migrants are bringing Covid-19 to the UK. This article is emblematic of many, painting a picture of a 'Disadvantaged', vulnerable migrant coming from unclean, high-risk living conditions, and posing a threat to the safety of those in the UK (i.e. to the readers themselves).

---

Later in the research period, individuals arriving across the Channel were no longer tested for Covid-19, only monitored for symptoms. However, the [Mail Online](#), the [Express](#) and [The Sun](#) continued to utilise the trope of the disadvantaged migrant as a threat to the UK. The heavy focus on the numbers of people arriving and the supposed threat this poses continues, disguising the reality that these are all individual people with individual stories and conditions they are fleeing. We also see a continued focus on quotations from the Home Secretary and Dover MP Natalie Elphicke in which they insist that the crossings must be stopped by cracking down on people smugglers and that people reaching the UK must be returned to France. The longer-term view that these dangerous crossings will stop only when there are safe, legal routes to the UK for those in desperate need is seldom mentioned.

We also saw a brief return to the focus on Covid-19 when nine individuals living in the camps in Calais started showing symptoms of the virus and two received positive diagnoses, triggering a resurgence of the 'migrants as threats' narrative. In the Mail Online's coverage, for example, we read that "it is feared the bug is starting to 'rampage' through the settlements": the word "rampage" heightens readers' fears and the source of the quoted word is not identified.

## OTHER TOPICS

As previously mentioned, the majority of the articles identified with the 'Threats' frame focused on the Channel crossings. However, one other topic - agricultural workers - is particularly important to mention as it also formed a substantial proportion of the 'Heroes' category (discussed earlier).

For example, this article in [The Sun](#) (*'Fruitcakes! Fury after 180 Romanian crop pickers who flew into the UK were not tested for coronavirus'*) focuses on one of six flights transporting Romanian seasonal workers to the UK after the unsuccessful call for a 'UK Land Army'. While other outlets used the same news event to hail these workers as heroes, The Sun depicted them as a threat, not only because of (unfounded) fears that they could bring the virus to the UK, but also because of the (baseless) assumption that these jobs could have been taken by British workers who had lost their work due to the lockdown.

The first of these was fuelled by the non-Covid-19 testing of workers when they arrived at the airport or at their respective farms. However, they were photographed wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) when getting off the plane, and we have already seen how migrants being tested for Covid-19 also fuels the narrative that those same migrants are bringing it to the UK.

The second line of attack in this article draws on the long-standing trope (used less frequently in British media in recent years) of the foreigner 'stealing British jobs' and playing into genuine concern over the high and growing level of unemployment seen during the lockdown. However, we have already seen that British workers had plenty of opportunity to apply to be part of the 'UK Land Army' and that it was only due to a lack of interest - just 4,000 people applied when 90,000 pickers are needed for a typical season - that workers from Eastern Europe had to be quickly flown in. However, The Sun (and other outlets) continued with these lines of attack, despite evidence to the contrary, painting workers described as 'Heroes' one day as 'Threats' the next, both times for the same reason: the simple fact that they were brought to the UK to pick fruit and vegetables.

---

**#YOUCLAPFORMENOW: VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS**

**ROLE OF BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC KEY**

**WORKERS DURING CORONAVIRUS**

**PANDEMIC**

*The Independent, 15 April*

**The new Battle of Hastings: With their camps in France stricken by coronavirus, boatloads of desperate migrants have been landing around the genteel Sussex resort... and some have even been chased barefoot by officers**

*Mail Online, 23 April*

## **Coronavirus: Mum struggling to live on £5 a day pleads for help as prices soar**

EXCLUSIVE: Torture survivor Fuligdi lives in a room in a Liverpool house with her terrified two-year-old daughter, forced to choose between buying food or medicine during the Covid-19 crisis. Charities are calling on the government to raise asylum support during the pandemic

*Mirror, 10 April*

**'I've already lost my home in Syria. I don't want to lose another': Refugee starts new job as NHS hospital cleaner to fight coronavirus pandemic**

*The Independent, 11 April*

**'SO LUCKY' Proud Syrian refugee wells up as he tells Piers Morgan about cleaning NHS hospital in coronavirus crisis**

*The Sun, 8 April*

**'We feel insulted': migrant health workers on PM's refusal to scrap NHS surcharge**

*The Guardian, 20 May*

---

## 'ONE OF US'

The 'One of us' frame, in which migrants are represented as equally valuable and worthy members of British society, proved slightly more elusive than the other three, occurring with relatively little frequency, aside from in *The Independent* in which the frame was identifiable in 24.8% of articles. Further, although the perception of migrants as 'One of us' is noticeably prevalent among articles about migrant NHS staff, the frame tended to span diverse 'categories' of migrants, and generally also intersected with other frames. This is somewhat unsurprising given that Covid-19 catalysed a general perception, common in moments of crises, that we are 'all in this together'.

For example, this article in [The Independent](#) (*'Coronavirus: Home Office urged to suspend 'hostile environment' amid fears infected migrants won't seek treatment'*) called for an end to the Government's "hostile environment" so that all migrants, including the undocumented, could access NHS services without fear of being detained, deported, or otherwise reprimanded. This was not only in the interest of migrants as individuals, but also in the interest of protecting public health. Running parallel to this were the calls to end the No Recourse to Public Funds condition on migrant visas and ensure financial support for migrants in order that all those who needed to self-isolate should not be disincentivised from doing so.

Migrants already residing in the UK were in the unprecedented position in which returning to their countries of origin, even temporarily, was largely unviable. Migrants and non-migrants alike were trapped within UK borders, bound by the same restrictions and facing a common enemy. In this climate, the perception of migrants as 'One of us' became more palatable. This came through at critical moments, such as soon after the Prime Minister was released from hospital and broadcast a video message on the [BBC](#) in which he both thanked the foreign-born nurses Jenny McGee and Luis Pitarma who had cared for him and made clear that "we will defeat" Covid-19 "together".

The idea that a collective battle was being waged against the virus that spanned race, class, and immigration status manifested in a handful of reports that expressed the idea of coronavirus as a 'reset button' - a chance for people of all walks of life to come together and for divisions to be united. The angle of this [Independent](#) article (*'Covid-19 does not discriminate, now we are all in the same boat'*) was that Covid-19, in destabilising the world as we know it, offered a unique opportunity to drive change and for humanity to show more compassion to those marginalised, such as migrant and refugee communities.

During moments such as the Thursday night 'Clap for Our Carers', in which it seemed that the whole nation rallied together in a display of common humanity, it felt like the 'reset button' had been firmly hit. However, media outlets can be credited for not blindly adopting that narrative, and for recognising that despite the greater recognition of migrant contributions, the pandemic could not be instantly heralded as the 'great leveller' that some had hoped for and hypothesised.

For example, a number of news outlets published articles highlighting the You Clap For Me Now video, in which first, second and third-generation migrants and BAME key workers read lines from a poem that shines a spotlight on a long history of racism and hostility towards foreigners and alludes to common tropes of the migrant as threat and foreign invader. While the video and the articles reporting on it were broadly if cautiously optimistic, welcoming the fact that Covid-19 had brought migrant contributions to the fore, several outlets, including [The Independent](#), (*'YouClapForMeNow: video highlights role of black and minority ethnic key workers during coronavirus pandemic'*), used this story as a means of discussing the inequalities that had not been dismantled by the pandemic and of noting that this moment of crisis could not be relied on as the harbinger of meaningful, long-lasting change. Such articles leave the reader with the recognition that the pandemic itself cannot generate the societal shift that is needed without the will of the people and public sphere to create an environment in which migrants are actively welcomed, and treated as 'One of us'.

### THE 'THREATS' FRAME AND MIGRANT VOICES

Of the 889 analysed articles, 21% included a migrant voice - the voice of someone directly impacted by the topic being reported on. This is much higher than found in [previous Migrant Voice research](#), which could be attributed to a positive shift in newsrooms towards including more migrant voices (at least partly driven by the growth of organisations such as Migrant Voice who support migrants to tell their stories and work closely with journalists to make that happen), or a temporary impact of the unprecedented situation of the pandemic and lockdown.

As our quantitative data showed, the percentage of articles including a migrant voice was fairly consistent across the four frames, with the exception of the 'Threats' frame, which featured a much lower percentage. This may not be surprising, since if the readers of your news website tend to view migrants (or a particular 'category' of migrant) as a threat, the voices of those migrants will not be valued. Furthermore, by including their voices, these 'threatening' migrants would turn into individual human beings who may appear vulnerable or disadvantaged (which can also be problematic in the representation of migrants) but who certainly do not pose a serious threat to the UK's health or national security.

This [Mail Online](#) article (*'The battle of Hastings: With their camps in France stricken by Coronavirus, boatloads of desperate migrants have been landing around the genteel Sussex resort...'*) is an example of how it becomes easy to dehumanise migrants and turn them into objects of fear, when there is no perspective of their own. In this and similar articles, groups of migrants are nearly always referred to in the plural, meaning that the individuals remain nameless, invisible, part of a homogenous, threatening mass. This impression is often conveyed through quotations from carefully selected non-migrant voices, as well as through the journalist's own words. In the Mail Online article, for instance, we hear from a number of people who live in or near Hastings where a boat landed in April this year, and whose words contribute to the perception of migrants as the threatening Other.

"There were loads of them," one local is quoted as saying. "About 20 of them have just come ashore near the pier now," said another. "When their boat docked, they hit the beach (in the middle of Hastings) and ran towards Old Town. This is happening all the time." A third resident was described shouting at Border Force officers, "We don't want them here."

Not every voice in this article is so hostile, but it is significant that the counter-narrative is provided not by a migrant or someone who advocates for migrants, but another local resident, who says they are "very very sorry for them indeed. There were young children involved. They were making an extremely difficult journey in extremely difficult circumstances. I feel deeply sorry for them."

While this voice does partially defuse the threat narrative - although not extensively, given the dominance of anti-migrant voices and the placing of this quote at the end of the article - the narrative introduced in its place is one of victimhood and lack of agency: not a helpful narrative if the end goal is to present migrants as individualised, rounded human beings.

It is important to recognise that it is not always feasible for journalists to seek out and quote migrants with experience of the issue at hand, particularly on topics such as the Channel crossings. It can be difficult to find people willing to speak, even anonymously, and deadlines are often too tight to identify and interview such people in time. However, even when it is impossible to include migrant voices in an article, journalists have a responsibility to source a balanced range of expert voices and to present these in a fair way. The Mail Online article addressed here epitomises a trend in media coverage - largely found in the Mail Online, Express and The Sun - that fails to do so.

---

## 'DISADVANTAGED' MIGRANT VOICES

With nearly half of articles analysed being identified with the 'Disadvantaged' frame, there was a concern that the 'migrant as victim' narrative, found so often in reporting on migrants and migration across the world, could be particularly prominent in this period. However, it was reassuring to find that almost one-third of these stories included a migrant voice, which can be a powerful antidote to a narrative that suggests migrants are passive, vulnerable victims in need of help and support from their host community.

This [Mirror](#) article (*'Mum struggling to live on £5 a day pleads for help as prices soar'*) is one example of a story where the 'Disadvantaged' frame was identified and where a narrative of tragedy and vulnerability is foregrounded. Phrases in the headline such as "Mum struggling" and "pleads for help" introduce that narrative, which is developed further through the article in emotive language such as "terrified two-year-old child", "constantly in tears" and "harrowing memories of abuse". However, there are also 13 paragraphs - the bulk of the article - that quote Fuligdi (the mum in the headline) directly. Although the quotations focus on the suffering experienced by her and her child, the significant presence of her voice and the fact that the quotations are full sentences, not individual words or phrases, mean that the reader is left with the impression of a real human being with agency, not just a passive victim. The final quotation from Fuligdi is: "I want to stay here and live in safety with my daughter but I can't until my refugee status is granted." This epitomises the dual representation of Fuligdi as a person with needs and desires, and someone who is a victim of the system.

This [Independent](#) article (*'Hundreds of asylum seekers have to travel to London to submit claims during a pandemic or face destitution'*), also focusing on the particular disadvantage faced by asylum seekers during Covid-19, exemplifies the problems created when there are no voices of those directly affected, only the voices of people supporting them. For example, we hear about one family described as "too scared to access the NHS", who have "no money to pay for treatment" and who are "having to wallow around, nervously keeping out of sight. It's an absolutely grim situation for them." The reader is left with the vague impression of a suffering family, but without hearing directly from them or learning any details about them that could round out the picture, we can only identify this family as unfortunate victims.

Broadly speaking, despite the high number of articles depicting migrants as disadvantaged, the victim narrative was reassuringly absent in many of those, with many outlets making an effort to include the voices of those affected and to avoid simplistic narratives of suffering.

---

## YOU CLAP FOR ME NOW & HASSAN AKKAD

If we look beyond the correlation of frames and migrant voices, we see two particular topics that caused a spike in articles featuring migrant voices, and these are worth analysing more closely. They were the launch and viral spread of the 'You Clap For Me Now' video and the story of Syrian hospital cleaner Hassan Akkad.

Looking at The Sun's coverage as a whole, for example, these were stories that went against the grain, with their inclusion of migrant voices. As many readers will remember, the video aimed to highlight the fact that many key workers are from migrant and/or BAME backgrounds and features first, second and third-generation migrants taking turns to read out lines of a poem. Lines include the following:

*"It's finally happened. That thing you were afraid of. Something's come from overseas. And taken your jobs. Made it unsafe to walk the streets. Kept you trapped in your homes."*

*"Despite long, shameful histories of facing racism and hostility, immigrants globally are showing kindness and solidarity by delivering essential aid and services to their nations."*

Broadly, the video was seen as emblematic of a wider mood of re-evaluation and reflection around treatment of migrants and ethnic minorities. However, coverage of the video did vary greatly across the spectrum of news outlets.

For example, [The Sun's](#) coverage (*'Heroes calling: My brave mum risked everything flying across the world to save NHS - and inspired our coronavirus hit You Clap For Me Now'*) emphasises the story and migrant background of the creative producer, Sachini Imbuldeniya, whose mother (also featured in the story) came to the UK from Sri Lanka in 1966. The journalist quotes Imbuldeniya at length and portrays the project as part of a reaction against the anti-migrant contexts of Brexit and Windrush. In a welcome shift away from a narrative that presents migrants as a mass, threatening Other (see section above), The Sun chooses to use bold print for this quote from Imbuldeniya: "I just want people to see everyone as a human."

However, the close focus on the producer and her mother appears less rebellious for this news outlet once we learn that Imbuldeniya's mother is an NHS nurse (that is, a member of a migrant group acceptable to Sun readers because of its hero status), and once we see that, then the message of the video itself (a problematic one for The Sun and its readers) is lost amidst the narrow focus on the producer and her mother. This is a far cry from [The Guardian's](#) main article about the video (*'You Clap For Me Now: video hails key workers with antiracist poem'*), which describes the video as "subvert[ing] racist language often directed at immigrants" in the very first paragraph.

We see similar divergences in stories about Hassan Akkad, a Syrian refugee motivated by the pandemic to take up a role as a cleaner at a hospital. [The Sun](#) (*'So Lucky: Proud Syrian refugee wells up as he tells Piers Morgan about cleaning NHS hospital in coronavirus crisis'*) chose to focus on Akkad's feelings of "honour" in helping Britain and the NHS and includes a social media user's description of Akkad as a "hero" - clearly positioning him as among the group of migrants deemed acceptable, even praiseworthy, at least during Covid-19. [The Independent](#) (*'I've already lost my home in Syria. I don't want to lose another': Refugee starts new job as NHS hospital cleaner to fight coronavirus pandemic'*) cites Akkad specifically downplaying this status: "I'm just a random guy who wanted to do something." This outlet also quotes his recommendation that "Britain should reassess its problem with migration after this." While The Sun portrays Akkad as an exceptional hero, The Independent's coverage presents him as an ordinary human being who, as a migrant, is subjected to hostility via Government policy and public narratives. Such a representation was extremely rare, if present at all, in any of the right-wing tabloids we studied for this research.

---

A spate of articles (in the [Mirror](#), [The Sun](#), [Mail Online](#), [The Guardian](#), for example) featuring Akkad's voice also appeared around the middle of May, during a period of intense scrutiny of NHS policy (including the International Health Surcharge [IHS] and bereavement scheme). There is no doubt that the platforming of Akkad contributed to the scrutiny that forced a U-turn on both these policies. The [Mail Online's](#) coverage (*'From the Calais Jungle to rubbing shoulders with Hollywood's A-listers...'*), however, both in its text and its selection of pictures, raises questions about why Akkad's voice was so coveted: the article repeatedly stresses Akkad's status as a Bafta award-winning filmmaker with high-profile friends in that industry. Not only is he presented as an exceptional hero (as we saw in [The Sun](#)), therefore in no way representative of all migrants and thus posing no threat to the outlet's anti-migrant narratives, but his extensive success is now foregrounded too.

In this sense, there are questions to be asked over which migrants are given the luxury of a platform - migrant success stories such as Hassan Akkad appear to gain favour in right-wing outlets, media outlets at the other end of the spectrum are more likely to court the voice of the 'everyday migrant'. For example, this [Guardian](#) article (*'We feel insulted': migrant health workers on PM's refusal to scrap NHS surcharge'*) gives a platform to a healthcare assistant, a care manager and a junior doctor to express their views on the IHS and visa costs more broadly. This diversity of ordinary migrant voices is rarely, if ever, found in [The Sun](#), [Express](#) and [Mail Online](#).

## POLICY CALLS

As well as the peaks around the International Health Surcharge (IHS) and the new Immigration Bill (discussed on pp.24-26), policy had a role to play in many ways throughout the period. Because of our understanding that Government policy and media coverage are often locked in a mutually influential relationship we chose to monitor both whether articles were responding to a policy change and whether they featured a call for policy change - and this relationship became abundantly clear through our research.

## RADICAL POTENTIAL

In some ways, the pandemic offered an exceptionally fluid policy context, with policymakers reacting to a rapidly evolving situation. As the pandemic escalated towards the end of March, news from other countries such as Portugal, where it was announced that all migrants would be treated as residents, signalled the radical potential of the situation. This development was reported on by [The Independent](#) (*'Coronavirus: Portugal to treat migrants as residents during coronavirus pandemic'*).

In the UK, our data showed a notable increase in the number of articles that called for policy change from the week beginning 16 March onwards. While these calls featured ideas that might have previously been considered bold, they were arguably made logical by the public health emergency of the pandemic. A good example was the situation around immigration detention centres. With the risk posed by coronavirus to detainees, many of whom have underlying health conditions, a policy based on confining them in close quarters could be criticised not just on the basis of being unjust, but also unsafe and illogical in the face of travel restrictions preventing deportation.

---

Both [ITV](#) and the [BBC](#) ran articles in the last week of March highlighting the unsafe conditions of detainees and featuring calls to close centres such as Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre in Bedfordshire. An opinion piece published by [The Independent](#) (*'Detained immigrants and prisoners do not get the option to socially isolate during the coronavirus crisis'*) presented a more forceful critique of detaining people during the pandemic, describing it as "utterly senseless". In a notable divergence from the more typical narratives employed by the [Mail Online](#), they also ran a story (*'Coronavirus could 'run rampant' through immigration removal centres within weeks, High Court hears...'*) that framed the centres in terms of the dangers posed to all by coronavirus (including detainees), rather than 'them' threatening 'us' with disease. The article even included a call for detainees to be released. The decision around this particular case was ultimately resolved in the courts, but it is nonetheless an interesting example of a harsh immigration policy (indefinite immigration detention) being spotlighted by the pandemic and across the full political spectrum of news outlets.

Of course, this was not the first time that calls have been made to close detention centres, and many of the policies that were reported on in coverage during this period are not recent implementations. However, it was interesting how the Covid-19 context seemed to give renewed credence to calls for the suspension or abolition of policies seen as harmful. This narrative of long-term, systemic flaws being laid bare by the pandemic and its accompanying lockdown was especially prevalent in [The Independent](#) and [The Guardian's](#) coverage, where a number of pieces connected the Covid-19 situation, migrants' conditions and a critique of the UK's policy environment around migration as a whole.

Policies that drew particular fire were the hostile environment measures and the No Recourse to Public Funds condition that is attached to many visas in the UK. This opinion piece in [The Guardian](#) (*'The Hostile Environment is creating a coronavirus crisis for Britain's migrants'*) is a good example of this approach, where multiple concerns, both long and short-term, are crystallised into one critique of a (perceived) anti-migrant policy landscape. As with detention, the calls for policy change are made more urgent by their connection to safety and health. For example, the author cites two migrants who have lost their income due to the pandemic and whose visas carry the NRPF condition. She notes, "As we're all being told to stay at home [...] migrants are worrying about how they'll feed themselves."

The deterrent effect of data-sharing between the NHS and the Home Office, part of the hostile environment, is also highlighted as a risk to public health, with the author concluding: "People's rights, their access to healthcare, their ability to survive – none of this should be determined by how much they earn, their perceived skills or their immigration status. This is as true now as it will be when the pandemic is over."

## NOT ALL NEW OUTLETS ON BOARD

While the conditions created by the pandemic allowed for the kind of argument outlined above, it should be noted that this of course did not mean universal pro-migrant discussion of policy. Most outlets, including [The Telegraph](#) and the [Mail Online](#), did feature policy calls for change aimed at improving migrants' situations, mostly around the IHS, although these outlets tended to discuss policies in a much more fragmented way, rather than linking them to a broader policy approach (i.e. the hostile environment).

---

When it came to border and asylum policy, however, migrants were much more likely to be seen in terms of posing a threat. Calls to “tighten” the UK’s borders, with increased surveillance technology, for example, to prevent migrants from crossing the Channel featured throughout the period. One story from [The Telegraph](#) (*‘Australian-style sea patrols needed to return migrants to France, says former Border Force chief’*) and from the [Mail Online](#) (*‘Priti Patel wants new powers to curb illegal migrants sneaking into UK and calls for law change so that dinghies can be turned around...’*) are evidence of this. While coronavirus undoubtedly meant that this period was one of heightened preoccupation with borders, these articles do not instrumentalise the virus in their arguments in the same way as the previously mentioned ones relating to hostile environment and NRPf.

## FROM POLICY CALLS TO POLICY CHANGE

The mutually influential relationship between media coverage and Government policy that inspired us to collect this data was most apparent in relation to policies around migrant NHS staff. As we saw in the quantitative analysis, the two policy calls that appeared in the largest number of stories were to eliminate the IHS for NHS workers, and to extend their visas free of charge. After the new Immigration Bill, the two policy changes most often reported on were also the IHS and the visa extensions for NHS workers. In both cases, the peak in the number of articles where the policy call was included came just before the peak in articles where the policy change was reported. While there are numerous factors that determine whether a policy change is made, it is surely significant that the two major migration-related policy changes announced during this period were immediately preceded by a deluge of media reports and commentary arguing for those changes. Other policy calls, such as releasing all detainees and ending NRPf, were included in far fewer articles and never experienced a significant surge that saw them dominate the news agenda and potentially pressure the Government to take action.

It is also notable that the two policy changes that did occur both related to the category of migrants most frequently featured in articles where the ‘Heroes’ frame was identified. With this in mind, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the media and the Government were most open to easing restrictive policies for a small group of migrants that the UK had decided were the country’s saviours during this period - and far less open to easing policies (even where this was both desperately needed and highly logical) for migrants who hadn’t been designated as heroes.

# CONCLUSION

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the first UK lockdown created radical potential for little-known issues to win front-page headlines and for meaningful policy change to be discussed and, in some cases, implemented. It was an opportunity, exploited by individuals and groups on all sides, to put forward agendas and start conversations.

However, significant positive change did not happen for all migrants, only for a select group of NHS workers whose hard work and sacrifices had earned them the respect of UK society and who were, for a few months at least, seen as 'Heroes' by the mainstream UK media.

It's encouraging that one in five stories during the first lockdown included a migrant voice; that the public and policymakers are now more educated on issues such as the No Recourse to Public Funds condition, the level of financial support provided to asylum seekers and the structural inequalities experienced by many migrant and BAME communities; and that (some) migrants are now widely recognised as valuable contributors to society.

Yet most migrant groups did not benefit from the extensive, supportive media coverage necessary to prompt significant policy change, and one of the two major policy changes that were implemented (visa extensions for some NHS workers) was a temporary measure only. Covid-19 was not 'the great leveller' that some hypothesised, even among migrant groups, with some labelled 'Heroes', others 'Threats', and their individual human stories often neglected.

Since the end of this research period, we've seen the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, reaching communities all across the UK as never before; we've seen report after report laying bare the inequalities faced by many migrant and BAME communities and exposed by Covid-19; and we've seen an uptick in hostility towards asylum seekers in the UK, with vigilantes patrolling south coast beaches and far-right groups targeting asylum seeker accommodation. And of course, we've seen a severe second wave of Covid-19, with further lockdowns and restrictions. It remains to be seen how these events will continue to impact media coverage of migration and we hope that others will take up further research in this area.



Report by Migrant Voice December 2020 © Migrant Voice

Image on front cover: Covid 19 Sutton South London  
Support NHS, by rollingstone64, Flickr

