

No. 4 (27), April 2021

## What if the migration does not quite work as planned?

This Spotlight is dedicated to presenting the assumptions, preliminary results and plans of a three-year ongoing project, "Local welfare system response to migrant poverty. Between innovations and inequality" (LocMig), directed by [@kjlukasiewicz](#) at CMR. It focuses on the local welfare systems response to migrant poverty in Berlin, Stockholm, London and New York City. It will also include the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on migrants and city policies.



*"Let's take control over our city. Every vaccinated person helps to achieve that" – says this poster in Polish by the © NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene*



# What if the migration does not quite work as planned?

Local welfare systems response to migrant poverty in Berlin, Stockholm, London and New York City. LocMig Project about the local welfare system response to migrant poverty.

Karolina Łukasiewicz, Ewa Cichocka, Kamil Matuszczyk

Although most migrants in Europe and the U.S. are more active in the labour market than nationals, they are overrepresented among people [struggling with poverty](#). Nearly half of the EU population at risk of poverty and social exclusion [lives in cities](#). As the percentage of migrants in many European Union (EU) cities has risen (especially post-2004 EU enlargement and post-2015 crisis), the urban population of migrants at risk of poverty and social exclusion has grown as well. [Politicians](#), [scholars](#) and [journalists](#) are paying increasing attention to this population.

While in response to migrant poverty, some national governments have been curbing access to social welfare programs for this population, cities have been stepping in and developing local welfare systems (LWS) responses to migrant poverty. These systems put in place policies to reduce poverty, such as unemployment programmes, family-related programmes, and social assistance (including housing),

which can, to a larger or smaller extent, be [mainstreamed to the migrants' needs](#).

Scholars of international migration pay increasing attention to localities. As a result, we know much about cities being more innovative and efficient in their local immigrant integration policies than central governments. However, less is known about cities' response to the needs of their most marginalised immigrant populations struggling with poverty and about the risks related to decentralising policies to the local levels (e.g. creating unequal opportunities). Using a case of four top-scale immigrant destination cities (London, New York, Berlin and Stockholm), [the LocMig project](#) funded by [the National Science Centre](#) aims to examine the LWS response to migrant urban poverty. LocMig will develop a novel theory explaining the role of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors in shaping various responses to migrant poverty (see: Chart 1). The four cities are selected for the study because they are all top migrant destinations, operate within different national and local welfare regimes, and have different national-level effectiveness in reducing migrant poverty.

The study will use a case of Polish immigrants (i.e. Polish-born), as they are the second-largest group among intra-EU migrants (1.1. million in 2016) and the third-largest among European migrants in the U.S. (nearly 425,000 in 2018). A massive interest has been dedicated to Polish immigration, particularly post-2004; however, only a handful of studies focus on Polish immigrants struggling with poverty. A comparative understanding of various poverty experiences and the use of services within different local welfare systems are missing.

The project's original assumptions were unexpectedly put to the test by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the migrants' new

social reality. Therefore, we were forced to adjust our schedule and add to our research questions about this new changing Covid-19 reality.

**What have we done so far?**

So far, the LocMig team ([Karolina Łukasiewicz](#), [Ewa Cichocka](#) and [Kamil Matuszczyk](#)) have analysed LWS in four cities based on policy documents (strategic documents produced by local administration related to migration and poverty), statistical indicators (OECD, Eurostat, ACS), and literature review (based on Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholars). The team has also been conducting expert interviews. The interviews that we have been conducted have

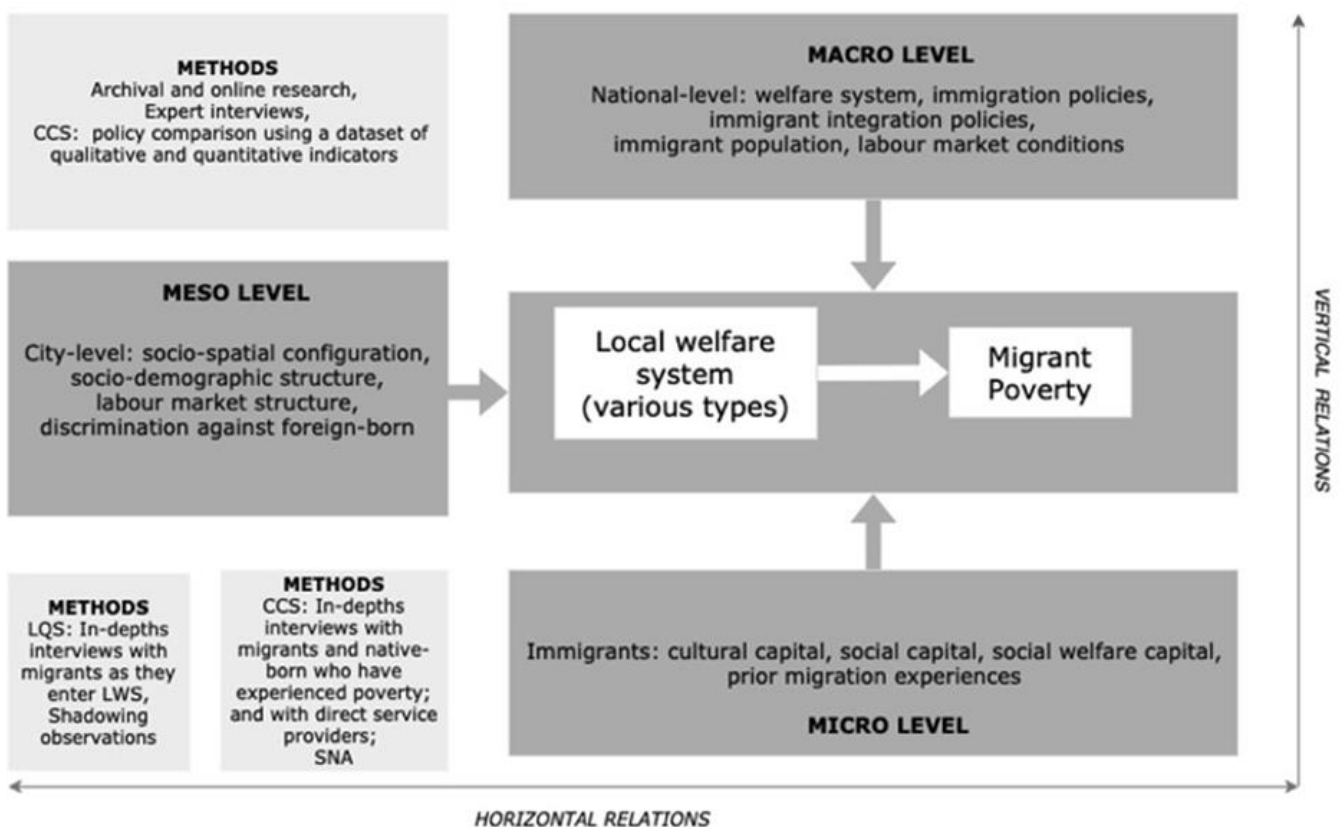


Chart 1. Project goals and methods

been audio-recorded and coded using [thematic analysis](#).

### **What have we learned so far about cities' response to migrant poverty?**

The local welfare system response to migrant poverty consists of local-specific demand for services and the services supplied in response to that demand. The LWS service supply varies in terms of (1) access to the LWS offered to immigrants; (2) identifying migrant poverty as a problem to a smaller or larger extent; (3) targeting local welfare system response at different categories of migrants, and (4) providing more or less standardised services by various types of public and private actors.

In London, NYC and Berlin, access to programs funded by the central government and implemented locally was usually more restricted than to programs funded and developed at the city-level. In London and NYC, access to welfare programs was more restrictively means-tested and limited to specific deserving migrant categories (e.g. the lowest income or undocumented migrants) compared to other cities. An exception was a handful of universal locally-developed and funded programs targeting families with children [Free Pre-K for four-year-olds](#), [soup kitchens](#), or [shelters](#). The inclusive local policies were often developed in opposition to exclusive central policies. The latter curbed the social citizenship of migrants. Compared to London or NYC, in Berlin, more local welfare programs were offered universally (for example, family-related programmes like [Kindergeld](#)). However, many were closely tied to employment (unemployment programmes and social assistance) and, more specifically, to so-called "insurable jobs". In Stockholm, all

documented immigrants, similarly to other city residents, had access to welfare programs that were to the most significant extent provided universally (e.g. family policies and [family benefits](#)).

Local governments in the four cities, to various extent, identified **migrant poverty as a problem** requiring their attention. In New York, migrant poverty was explicitly targeted as a policy goal and [carefully monitored](#) by the city administration. In London, the local administration viewed mostly asylum seekers as the most vulnerable group and was put in such a condition by the U.K. austerity politics. In Berlin, the poverty of people with a migration background was identified as an issue requiring public attention, specifically for [asylum seekers and refugee populations](#). In Stockholm, poverty was only contextualised to spatial segregation, which implicitly referred to residents with a migration background.

In all cities, various categories of migrants were attracting specific attention from the local administration and nonprofit organisations. In Stockholm and Berlin, much of the LWS's attention was focused on forced migrants. In NYC, public attention focused on low-income immigrants; in London, mainly on asylum seekers and EU migrants in the Brexit-context. In NYC, the most vulnerable group identified as such by the city administration are undocumented immigrants.

In all cities, services available to income immigrants were provided by public-private partnerships to a varying extent. In Stockholm, relatively standardised services were mainly provided by public agencies, except private, for-profit providers. In London and NYC, service

provision took place mostly through nonprofit subcontractors of the federal government, state and city administration. Due to the subcontracting structure, the federal-level standards of providing services were often insufficient and resulted in varying quality of services offered to all low-income residents, including immigrants. In London, the diversity of quality of services depended not only on public and private service provision structure but also on city boroughs which enjoyed a high level of autonomy in service design and delivery. In Berlin, a patchwork of private-public partnerships was involved in delivering services, with large Christian organisations' dominant role.

Overall, in Berlin, London and NYC, privatisation expressed in multiple public and private actors implementing policies within the local welfare system led to a "coordination challenge". Local governments struggled to coordinate the policies implemented by numerous actors and the diversity of how the policies and programs operated. Additionally, in London and NYC, central-level welfare reforms, shifting policies to the local levels combined with insufficient funding led to ongoing local-policy underfunding.

The supply of services within the LWS varied across the cities in terms of [immigrant mainstreaming](#). NYC seemed to create the most inclusive environment with the most city services being provided [to Limited English Proficient New Yorkers in the top six languages spoken](#) in the city. European cities required native-language proficiency to access their services to a more significant extent than NYC.

The diversity of service provision for immigrant residents of the four cities was rooted in macro-level (national-level model of welfare system), meso (cities' economy and socio-demographic structure), and micro-level factors (migrant population characteristics). The migrant-inclusiveness of local-level policies in NYC closely related to the city's history of rapid migratory influx, which dated back to the turn of the century. In London, it is more recent (post-WWII), and in Berlin and Stockholm, the most recent (the 1970s). Also, the varying ratios of immigrants represented among those struggling with poverty and unemployment in four cities generated different demand for the supply of immigrant services within the LWSs. Although London and NYC had high GDP per capita, it was combined with high-income inequality and a liberal welfare model, which created unique challenges for the local welfare system to address the most vulnerable populations' needs.

Instead of providing sufficient social support, following liberal welfare models, London and NYC provided their immigrant populations with easy access to low-wage service jobs' absorbent labour market. That was eventually reflected in much lower unemployment rates among foreign-born New Yorkers (8.7%) and Londoners (6.8%), compared to Berlin (16.3%) and Stockholm (13.3%). However, at the same time, foreign-born Londoners and New Yorkers experience higher underemployment rates than residents of Stockholm and Berlin.

In Stockholm and Berlin, social inequalities were much lower than in London and NYC (respectively 0.29 and 0.30 vs 0.39 and 0.42). Consequently, immigrants experienced higher



unemployment rates (16.3% in Berlin; 13.3% in Stockholm). Given a more generous welfare state model, they were also offered more substantial social support. In Stockholm, the generous, universal support failed to mitigate the adverse outcomes of multi-generational poverty in segregated city outskirts.

The four case studies' preliminary analyses indicate that all cities struggle to respond to migrant poverty adequately due to a country-level reluctant welfare state model (London, NYC) or less migratory experiences (Berlin, Stockholm).

### **Moving forward**

We have begun the qualitative data collection and analysis, including 72 interviews with Polish migrants and native-born who experienced poverty and with direct service providers. We have also started the first wave of longitudinal research in four cities to understand how overcoming poverty occurs (or is hindered) in “real-time” as participants enter local welfare systems. The longitudinal study is based on 48 interviews and four shadowing observations conducted in three waves of interviews with LWS migrant participants and persons directly providing services.

The need to mitigate migrant poverty became particularly important in the context of the health and economic crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic, similarly to previous global shocks resulting from natural disasters, political or economic emergencies, led to a sharp rise in poverty levels and exacerbated already existing class inequalities. Although comparative data on the exact magnitude of this change is still missing, [numerous works](#) and [commentaries](#) report an escalation of previous

problems and the emergence of entirely new social issues in cities. Cities' frontline workers, predominantly foreign-born and employed in economic sectors most affected by the pandemic (hospitality, food, transport, delivery, shopping, services), have been [particularly hard hit](#). For these people, losing their jobs overnight meant falling into a spiral of overlapping problems. For example, in NYC, immigrants faced new issues such as sudden job loss and not finding a new one; or food insecurity (e.g. 40% of clients of Polish-speaking Ridgewood-based nonprofit POMOC admitted to not have enough food for themselves or their children). Simultaneously, the pandemic reinforced well-known old challenges of [limited access to the healthcare system](#) (including Covid testing, treatment and vaccines) and federal-funded welfare programs. The pandemic has also increased discrimination against [Asian workers in many cities](#). Resentment towards immigrants has become a newly widespread problem that is difficult to solve. Also, international students have encountered hitherto unknown issues. Remote learning in Sweden, introduced at Swedish universities, has become the basis for [proposals to limit the stay](#) in the country of those who can continue their studies online.

An analysis of policy responses to mitigate the pandemic's negative impact on immigrants in OECD countries shows that various efforts have been introduced to protect foreign workers or access to education for immigrant children. However, most programs have been developed at the national level. Little is known about local interventions towards vulnerable migrant groups, especially about access to general policies. According to the [World Bank report](#), some cities made efforts to ensure access to

basic infrastructure for vulnerable citizens, including frontline workers or immigrants. This mainly concerned housing and accommodation (e.g. Berlin, New Orleans, London, San Francisco, Stuttgart) or providing internet access (e.g. Barcelona).

The long-term effects caused by the health crisis may lead to increased levels of relative and situational poverty. Consequently, [researchers predict](#) that in post-pandemic time, an uncontrolled migration spike to the cities will occur in the OECD region. Thus, the population of people in need of assistance measures will increase, new problems will arise, and old ones remain unsolved.



**Karolina Łukasiewicz**

PhD, Research Associate at the Centre of Migration Research, a P.I. in LocMig project and a lecturer at Silver School of Social Work at New York University.



**Ewa Cichocka**

PhD candidate at Faculty of Sociology, University of Warsaw. Junior Researcher at the Centre of Migration Research (the LocMig project)



**Kamil Matuszczyk**

PhD candidate at Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw. Junior Researcher at the Centre of Migration Research (the LocMig project)

Suggested citation: Łukasiewicz K., Cichocka E., Matuszczyk K., 2021, *What if the migration does not quite work as planned?*, CMR Spotlight 4(27).

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not reflect the opinions or views of the CMR or its members.

Editors of CMR Spotlight: Michał Nowosielski, Dominika Pszczółkowska

© 2021 Centre of Migration Research

