Go Home

Mapping the unfolding controversy of Home Office immigration campaigns

Introduction

In July 2013, the UK Home Office launched a series of high-profile initiatives aimed at directing public attention to what the government was doing to control 'illegal immigration'. The most controversial of these was a billboard which asked 'In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest', which was mounted on a van and driven around London boroughs. Our research project is about studying the impact and implications of these initiatives. We have also been interested in the responses of activists to them, including ongoing developments as the research takes place between 2013 and June 2015.

This briefing highlights our key findings at the end of the funded research for our project. We will continue to develop further detailed writing on the findings in articles for academic journals and for broader audiences, and in a book which we expect to be available in 2016.

You can continue to keep up with further outputs from the project on our website: **mappingimmigrationcontroversy.com** and through 🐦**@micresearch**.

You may also be interested in a (very) short film about what we have found: **mappingimmigrationcontroversy.com/film/**

> HEADLINE FINDING
> Government publicity campaigns that demonstrate 'toughness' on immigration cause a significant minority of people to become more worried about irregular migration. This includes people who are scared that they are being targeted – both migrants and British citizens – and people who are worried that migration is 'out of control'.

10 Key Findings

1. We found **no evidence that government communications about immigration** and enforcement are based on research about 'what works' in managing immigration. The only research evidence policy makers mentioned to us was privately commissioned research on managing public opinion about immigration, particularly among those worried that immigration is 'out of control'. Yet our research suggests the tactics used on this basis can increase fear and anxiety.

2. **Government campaigns on immigration provoked or increased anger and fear**, among irregular migrants, regular migrants, and non-migrants, including people opposed to immigration. The latter told us they that the government campaigns were ineffective 'theatre'.

3. For people who were the subjects of immigration campaigns (or felt under threat from them), talking about the publicity campaigns often led them to think about their own experiences of immigration enforcement and triggered feelings of fear and anxiety. **Our research focused on communications campaigns, but participants made direct links to, for example, images of enforcement raids and their own experiences of immigration enforcement in their homes.**

4. **Hard-hitting government publicity on immigration seemed to provoke new waves of pro-migrant activism**. Anger and outrage was translated into online and street-based activism, including of people who had not been engaged in activism before.

5. Some, but not all, activism has been migrant-led, and **we identified inequalities in who felt able to take part in political debate because of real or perceived threats to their residency status as a result**.

6. **Traditional anti-racism campaigns are finding it hard to keep up with changes in the focus of hostility and discrimination**, for example with how to engage with the status of international students and asylum seekers.

7. Our local case studies demonstrated **local variations in how government campaigns were experienced, and the activism that was produced in response**. In some places migrants and activists could build on existing infrastructures for political organising. In other places such resources did not exist or had dwindled, or energies were focused on service provision for vulnerable people in an increasingly difficult funding environment.

8. **There is not always solidarity between people being targeted by anti-immigration campaigns**. We found several instances of hostility between different groups of migrants, often based on an idea that their own group was 'deserving' of residency and status in the UK, while others were 'undeserving'.

9. The different legal statuses that migrants can have is confusing, and for many people in the wider public, the distinctions between 'illegal' and 'legal', and between asylum seeker, refugee, student, worker, resident, and sometimes between migrants and ethnic minority British-born people is difficult to understand. **Many people reported harassment for being 'illegal immigrants' when they had settled status, or were British citizens**.

10. **We heard that many people had come to the UK because of ideals often promoted as 'British values'** – such as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs. **Their experience since arrival called into doubt the existence of these values in Britain.**

What is the research project?

Our research began in 2013, with the following aims:

- To document high-profile Home Office campaigns against irregular immigration, in six local areas of the UK and at a national level

- To identify how government communications on migration interact with public debate and activism

- To produce analysis that informs debates, community action and policy, and that is useful to community organisations

- To develop new research methodologies that link digital, face-to-face and 'traditional' communications and policy channels

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the research and dissemination methodologies used in the project, and the project's impact

Our research seeks to answer these questions:

What are the impacts of the Home Office high-profile publicity campaigns about migration?

How are the messages of these government campaigns understood by residents in targeted areas? What forms of activism and community organising are being developed in response to these campaigns?

What are the relationships between public attitudes to 'illegal' migration, migration policy, racism and good community relations, particularly in a context of austerity?

Who is aware of the government campaigns and activist responses to them? What are the class, ethnicity and gender dimensions of public debates at a UK level on migration? Do these differ at a local level? What is the role of social research in this?

What research have we done?

The research has been based in 6 areas: Barking and Dagenham; Bradford; Cardiff; Glasgow; Ealing and Hounslow; West Midlands (Birmingham and Coventry). Some of these areas (Barking and Dagenham, Ealing and Hounslow) were targeted by the Go Home van. Others (Glasgow, Ealing and Hounslow) include reporting centres for migrants where similar advertising was used. All of them have experienced high-profile immigration raids and local news items where reporters accompany border agents, have signs about limitation of migrant rights displayed in public places (e.g. hospitals), and/or are involved in national debates about race and migration.

Across these areas, we have conducted 13 focus groups with approximately 67 people (including new migrants, long-settled migrants, ethnic minority and white British citizens), to understand the local effects of government campaigns on immigration. We have also interviewed 24 local activists about the effects on their work, and spent time documenting local events and protests. Nationally, we have interviewed policy makers about the intentions and thinking behind such campaigns, and commissioned a survey of 2,424 people from Ipsos MORI to investigate awareness and reactions to the government campaigns. We have participated in and documented online debates about key elements of the campaigns and reactions to them. We took our interim findings back to the communities and organisations with whom we had conducted the initial research, and included their responses in the findings we present here.

Detailed findings

How are the messages of government campaigns understood by residents in targeted areas?

We found a range of responses, from people who had uncertain migrant status, who were settled migrants with legal right to remain, who were ethnic minority and white British citizens. All of the responses were emotionally charged, most notably with **anger** and **fear** – both from people who were angered and scared by the Home Office campaigns, and people who were worried about migration. Some people who had not heard about the publicity before we asked their opinions found it **unbelievable that it was a government campaign** – several thought the 'Go Home' van had been produced by groups such as the English Defence League or the UK Independence Party, and noted how the language echoed slogans of violent racists in the 1970s. In Scotland, we frequently heard the Home Office tactics being **rejected as a Westminster imposition**, not suited to Scotland, and used to support arguments for Scottish independence in the context of the referendum campaign. The vast majority of people we spoke to in the focus groups thought that the Home Office publicity was a **political stunt** rather than an effective policy – whatever their political stance on immigration.

> "I saw so many UKBA people they were there, I saw them with large dogs, blocking the entire area. I had a visa and have it now also. But I got really scared because I could see the place blocked… I got so panicked and scared that I went and sat in the wrong train… When I got on the train I started crying. I was thinking how long will I live with this fear... I started to think to myself, if I can't move around at all, that people are blocking the way like this, and I'm so scared then perhaps suicide is better."
>
> *Ealing and Hounslow*

> "Where I live, there have been a few racist things going on, every time they've seen me they've always told me to go back to my country. But now imagine if they saw this and they know this has come from the Government... They won't care to know whether I've got my stay or not … if I saw this van, even though I've got my stay and I know I'm safe, I would still feel very bad about it and thinking of where I've come from, what I've gone through, and the people who it affects."
>
> *Bradford*

What forms of activism and community organising are being developed in response to these campaigns?

We found that activist reactions to the Home Office campaigns varied across our local areas. This often seemed to be **related to the local histories of organising** in the different places. For example in Glasgow and in Ealing and Hounslow there were existing networks of migrant campaigners and charities who organised quickly in response to the posters in reporting centres there, including through street demonstrations, rallies and organising for questions to be asked in the Scottish Parliament. The government's campaigns appear to have given rise to **new waves of political activism**, mobilising people who had not previously been involved in demonstrations or political comment.

In other parts of the UK, pressure on the voluntary sector around both funding and scope for campaigning were affecting what activities could be organised. In Cardiff and in the West Midlands in particular, we found debates were ongoing about the balance between migrant self-organising and servicing models of the voluntary sector. Getting the balance between engaging in political debate and supporting people in extreme difficulty put **pressure on activists and organisations**, and the risks for making political statements could also vary between people with migrant and citizen statuses. The most active campaigning against the Home Office publicity that we found was in the London and Scotland case studies, which may be related to the more high-profile interventions from the Home Office being targeted there. Online campaigning against the Home Office tactics was also significant, both through social media, on news comments pages, and in the way that street protests were linked to social media.

> "They're trying to give the impression that they're doing something about it: "We are doing our job, we are catching these illegals, we are putting them in the van and we're taking them to the jail" and half an hour later they're going to let them go again, they're not saying that bit, are they?"
>
> *Barking and Dagenham*

Who is aware of the government campaigns and what are their responses?

In our national survey, conducted by Ipsos MORI[1], we asked a nationally representative sample of 2,424 people about their awareness of different elements of Home Office publicity about migration control. Though the 'Go Home' vans and Twitter images of raids promoted by the Home Office made national headlines, only 26% and 6% of people respectively knew about them. To compare this with less media-publicised measures, 31% of people had noticed branded border control signs introduced in 2006, and 20% of people had seen NHS signs stating 'NHS hospital treatment is not free for everyone'. People with higher incomes were more likely to be aware of the publicity than those on lower incomes. White people were more likely to be aware of the 'Go Home' vans (28%) than Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) people (22%). More BME people (23%) than White people (16%) were aware of Immigration Enforcement branded vans on UK streets.

In the same survey, we asked people who had heard about the campaigns what they thought of them. We found that **more people were concerned that unfair treatment might result from the Go Home vans (34%), than were reassured by them (28%)**. A similar pattern was true of the Home Office tweets of immigration raids (33% and 20%). However, the reverse was true for more everyday interventions such as adverts in hospitals stating 'NHS hospital treatment is not free for everyone' and local news stories about immigration raids; they tended to reassure more people (41% and 31%) that action was being taken than worry them that people might be treated unfairly (19% and 26%).

However, **all of these measures caused some people to become more worried about irregular migration** as a problem: 15% of people said the Go Home vans made them 'concerned that irregular immigration might be more widespread than they had realised'; this was 14% for the NHS signs, 18% for local news stories, and 22% for tweets.

What are the class, ethnicity and gender dimensions of public debates at a UK level on migration? Do these differ at a local level?

In the survey we commissioned from Ipsos MORI[1] we asked a question which outlined the threatening and militarised approach of immigration raids and asking about how respondents might feel if they witnessed such a raid in their neighbourhood. This revealed **greater levels of agreement with the initiative when the survey included greater detail about the threatening manner of raids**; in both versions of the question, significant proportions of people said witnessing raids would make them concerned about the presence of migrants and/or the welfare of those subject to the raids:

	On Home Office raids for suspected illegal immigrants, officers may arrive in teams, wearing flak jackets. Following questioning, immigration officers may make arrests and take suspected illegal immigrants away in a van or other vehicle. How would you feel if you saw an immigration raid on suspected illegal immigrants going on in your local area? (Weighted base: 547, Unweighted base: 564. Respondents could choose more than one of the options in response)	How would you feel if you saw an immigration raid on suspected illegal immigrants going on in your local area? (Weighted base: 560, Unweighted base: 578. Respondents could choose more than one of the options in response)
Feel it is a necessary measure to help tackle irregular/illegal immigration in the UK	31% (169)	23% (132)
Reassured that the government is taking action against irregular/illegal immigration	29% (157)	25% (138)
Feel it is a necessary measure to help tackle irregular/illegal immigration in your local area	28% (151)	24% (133)
Concerned that there may be irregular/illegal immigrants in your area	14% (75)	15% (84)
Concerned that irregular/illegal immigration may be more widespread than you had realised	13% (73)	14% (80)
Concerned about the human rights of the people being questioned	13% (69)	16% (88)
Concerned that people may be arrested unnecessarily	13% (69)	14% (77)
Concerned that people may be questioned unnecessarily	11% (59)	11% (64)
Concerned about the show of force in your local area	10% (55)	9% (49)

Without the explicit warning that practices such as raids might target people on the basis of skin colour or accent, respondents appeared to be unconcerned about the potential racism and discrimination of such practices of immigration control. Yet when invited to consider eye-witness reports that people were targeted by skin colour in immigration checks, significant numbers expressed concern that this would not be acceptable:

Some people have suggested that white people are less likely to be questioned during checks or raids on suspected irregular/illegal immigrants. How acceptable or unacceptable do you think it would be if immigration officers carried out checks on the basis of someone's skin colour? (Weighted base: 2371; Unweighted base: 2424)	
Very acceptable	4% (102)
Fairly acceptable	10% (238)
No opinion either way	24% (558)
Fairly unacceptable	17% (408)
Very unacceptable	43% (1015)
Don't know	2% (50)

This suggests to us that **the ways survey questions are phrased can suppress concerns about racist and violent impacts of everyday immigration control**.

In the same survey conducted for us by Ipsos MORI[1], we asked people across the country to respond to a situation experienced by one of our focus group participants:

'Person A is a migrant to the UK and has a legal right to remain here. She has seen a Home Office immigration check taking place on public transport, where suspected irregular/illegal immigrants are taken away in vans or other vehicles and she found it frightening. She has decided to go out less and avoid certain places.'

In response, **the majority of people felt that 'immigration checks and raids should not be frightening to anyone'** (53% of respondents). More women (55%) than men (51%) had this reaction. More white (55%) than 'non-white' (48%) respondents felt this way. **60% of people felt it would unacceptable for immigration checks to be carried out on the basis of someone's skin colour** (26% had no opinion or didn't know). In no demographic group did less than 51% of people think this would be unacceptable, or more than 21% of people think it was acceptable.

In our local research studies, we found that some people who are British or EU citizens, or have legal leave to remain, felt that people with this status did not have anything to fear. Others felt this wasn't true and that knowing such messages were being put out by government could reinforce and support existing racist/xenophobic abuse they had experienced. One activist in Bradford described how Asian British-born citizens were asking him if they would be allowed to stay in the country.

> "You talk to people and they say… "Are we going to be allowed to stay here?" This is third generation, they've contributed, you know. There's this sort of slight feeling with what's going on, not necessarily the neighbours, but with the rhetoric."
>
> *Bradford*

However, in other areas (Barking and Dagenham), white British people told us they now felt that they were the ethnic minority. Distinctions were made between migrants who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, versus more recent EU migrants, with the more recent arrivals seen more negatively. Participants who were hostile to new migration described it as a problem of not enough resources such as jobs and healthcare (for existing residents), and also said that they did not see new arrivals assimilating into British life.

What is the role of social research in analysing and informing these government campaigns and the activist responses to them?

We have not come across any evidence that there is a social scientific evidence base for Home Office publicity campaigns about immigration (though admittedly it has been difficult to gain access to policy makers directly involved in administering this publicity).

Policy makers we spoke with said, in fact, that both government and campaigners deliberately avoided quoting social and economic research within public debates on immigration.

It appears that some research on attitudes to immigration is being used, specifically a set of reports conducted by think tanks and private research organisations which suggest that public attitudes to immigration policy are emotion-driven, that messaging using statistics will be rejected because people think that 'statistics can't be trusted'.

As a result, the approach that seems to be advocated by Westminster policy communities working on immigration messaging (from whatever political stance) seems to be (a) an assumption that the general public sees immigration as excessive, and a problem, and is anxious about this; (b) there is no room for debate, and people will only be reassured by seeing evidence of tougher immigration controls.

On the other hand, we found a huge appetite for social research on these issues among civil society organisations, reflected in particular in their involvement in our research.

> "The public are not going to believe any immigration statistics. So while the Treasury might be believed on its growth figures, it will never be believed on its economic impacts of immigration. There's more mistrust about immigration… With immigration you have every reason to disbelieve data, because the government has told you it's crap at collecting it."
>
> *Policy interview*

More on our methods and future outputs from the project

From the outset of the project we have been working with **community organisations as partners**. This has helped to guide the direction of the research, ensuring that it has value and relevance beyond academia, and has provided invaluable practical support.

Through this project we hope to have unsettled the division between **'activism' and 'academia'**. We have tried to think carefully about the sort of contributions academic researchers can make to the groups and individuals we work with – because of the time, resources, and specialist skills to which we have access – and to recognise that research partners and participants may have similar skills but are in different positions during the project, because of their personal circumstances, political commitments, institutional priorities, or pressures of time, work and resources. In being able to attach funds to the work done by the community partners, we could fully recognise and value their expertise and time commitment to the study.

Such partnership working takes place in a context where there are immense **pressures on the voluntary sector**. We were very conscious of adding to the workload of these groups. Therefore being clear about roles within the project and managing expectations on both sides has been crucial. In addition, for groups working on asylum issue with specific goals there was a mismatch between our interests (anti-immigration campaigns) and the very specific and urgent issues groups were dealing with (such as destitution and deportation). This is an ongoing question, which needs to be continuously negotiated in such research projects. We hope to develop further writing on this subject, which may be helpful for researchers and partners in similar research relationships in the future.

Our **focus groups** provided forums for discussing how anti-immigration campaigns have been experienced by various groups across the UK. These were often highly emotional conversations. They were characterized by stories of fear and anxiety from a range of groups with different attitudes to, and experiences of, migration and asylum. People also clearly expressed that they were not only victims, and made calls for their rights and dignity to be respected. We intend to write further publications on how emotions and power operate in research on such 'sensitive' topics.

At our **feedback** events, participants have highlighted how research is often not presented back to those who take part. In our case, the feedback events have produced useful discussions, which have been integral to our research data and analysis.

In our **survey**, we wished to avoid questions about immigration that elicited 'pro' or 'anti' responses. Instead we used a set of scenarios and asked respondents to identify how they thought they would react. The logic behind this was that the Home Office have used a number of emotional triggers, in their anti-immigration campaigns. If those emotional triggers are altered, how might it change responses? However, we found that, when working with commercial survey companies, their underlying assumptions and commitments can make it difficult to develop such methodological techniques which critique the underlying assumptions of traditional polling data that public opinion is static or that survey questions can be 'neutral'. Again, we intend to reflect and write further on what the possibilities might be for linking different forms of research methods in this way in the future.

We designed the project as a piece of **'Live Sociology'**, underpinned by a commitment to intervening in debates as they happen **and producing knowledge that can contribute to social justice**. Our Live Sociology has included writing on our project blog and through our project Twitter account, as well as writing for other non-academic publications. While the blog and the Twitter account have been successful, and have had enthusiastic responses, particularly from people working in the migrant rights sector, not everything we tried has worked: our idea of hosting a Twitter debate was less successful at promoting debate than the longer blog entries we have written.

The film that we commissioned is an example of a **valuable output** that can travel beyond academic circles, condensing key findings from the research in a short, accessible format. We have been told that it will be used in teaching and by activist groups, as well as circulating online. We intend to develop online learning guides, which will be freely available to support such use.

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Our community research partners on this project are:

- Birmingham Asylum and Refugee Association
- Bradford Resource Centre
- Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group
- Foundation for Refugee Education, Cardiff
- Positive Action In Housing, Glasgow
- Refugee and Migrant Forum of Essex and London
- Southall Black Sisters
- Women Seeking Sanctuary Advocacy Group, Cardiff
- Asylum Support and Immigration Resource Team, Birmingham

Our national policy partners on the project are:

- Glasgow Refugee and Migrant Network (GRAMNet)
- Migrant Voice
- The Runnymede Trust
- Scottish Refugee Council

Many other organisations and individuals have helped to make this project a success. A film highlighting key findings from the project was produced for us by Samantha Asumadu: **www.thefeministfilmmaker.com**

We would also like to thank all of our research participants

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