

# The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and refugee-assisting organisations in Scotland

## — Executive Summary

scottish  
refugee  
council

# Executive summary

In July 2020 Scottish Refugee Council surveyed 290 refugees living in Scotland and 75 organisations supporting and working with them on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Key findings**
- **Physical and mental health**
- **Digital inclusion**
- **COVID 19 information and public health measures**
- **Social isolation and connections**
- **Safety**
- **Organisational concerns**
- **Recommendations**



# Physical and mental health

65% of men reported their physical health in the last four weeks as either good, very good or excellent. Only 55% of women fell into these categories.

46% of men and women rated their mental health in the last four weeks as either good, very good or excellent. **41 women (30% of respondents) and 35 men (33% of respondents) stated that their recent mental health had been poor or very poor.**

Only 34% of people with insecure immigration status (people in the asylum system or refused asylum) rated their recent mental health as being good, very good or excellent, with 40% of respondents in this situation rating their mental health as being very poor.

17 organisation respondents stated that deteriorating mental health of the people they work with was a significant concern before COVID-19. This increased to 21 who identified it as a top current concern.

**70% of respondents with insecure immigration status said that not having enough money to buy food was a serious or moderate problem.** Responding to food poverty has become a far greater area of concern for organisations supporting refugees since the COVID-19 lockdown.

22 respondents (7.6%) stated that they, or someone in their household had tested positive for COVID-19.

# Digital inclusion

90% of respondents had access to a smartphone. But only 44% had access to a PC and 20% had access to a tablet. 67% of respondents reported they had broadband and 78% reported they had mobile data.

While there was evidence of gaps between genders in terms of access to devices and mobile data, these appear less significant than the increased exclusion from digital access faced by people with insecure immigration status.

Across every measure, access to devices, and most markedly to broadband, appeared to be reduced for our respondents who were either still in the asylum process or had been refused asylum: **1 in 4 did not have a smartphone and only 1 in 3 had access to a PC.**

A small but significant minority of people – 14% of women and 21% of men – stated that they were either only a little or not at all confident in their ability to use the internet.

Parents appeared most concerned about the effect of their limited digital connectivity on their children's education.

Only 10 organisational respondents placed digital poverty as one of the top three needs of their client group pre-COVID-19. This increased to 29 who described it as a current top organisational concern.

***“New country new faces. all the time at home. Without network.....oh no very difficult.”***

(Sri Lankan woman, seeking asylum)

***“[COVID] Impacted my mood and mental health a lot as I'm living alone”***

(Malaysian Woman, refugee status)

# COVID 19 information and public health measures

**75% of respondents were confident that they had access to accurate information on COVID-19.**

The Scottish Government was cited as top source where people got information about COVID-19.

There were high levels of compliance with key public health measures. 86% reported they always complied with guidance on handwashing. 64% of respondents stated they always observed social distancing guidance. And, 73% said they always wore mask in shops or public transport.<sup>1</sup>

In relation to government guidance on daily exercise only 31% of respondents said they managed to do so always or often.

---

1. To note the data collection period was from 8 July to 26 July. The wearing of face coverings in Scotland became mandatory in shops, public transport and in certain other indoor public places on 22 July 2000 towards the end of the survey.

# Social isolation and connections

In both surveys, isolation emerged as the single most prominent problem or concern singled out by respondents.

COVID-19 situation was a real source of anxiety and had a negative impact on mental health, with many respondents relating their feelings of poor mental health back to loneliness and isolation.

**30% of people with secure immigration status (people who have received refugee status and resettled refugees), and 37% of those with insecure status (in the asylum process or refused asylum), had phone or in person contact with friends or relatives only a few times a month or less.**

While people with settled immigration status on the whole appeared confident in their knowledge to access support, those with insecure status were a lot less so.

***“I have no one in Scotland, it has been an incredibly lonely and scary time.”***

(Zimbabwean woman, in asylum process)

***“I’m living alone, who will know about me if I die?”***

(man with refugee status)

# Safety

Across men and women respondents and respondents with different immigration statuses, people indicated that they broadly felt safe in Scotland with 67% reporting they felt extremely or very safe.

**23 people explicitly said that racist abuse, or their visibility as a person of colour or a woman wearing the hijab made them feel unsafe in Scotland.**

25 people noted that more general anti-social behaviour in their area undermined their sense of safety.

# Organisational concerns

Lockdown has increased demand for services, even although some people struggle to access remote provision, and has placed resourcing pressures on refugee-assisting organisations.

29 organisations said that digital skills and the ability to facilitate digital group work as being one of their three most pressing requirements.

**70% of organisations have been able to access specific funding to meet the challenges of continuing services throughout lockdown. This was slightly lower for refugee-led and community-based groups at 66%.**

Most respondents felt that the local response to the pandemic had been effective to some degree, nevertheless respondents' comments highlighted that coordination and efforts to avoid duplication should continue to be a focus of efforts in future.

In the longer term, acquiring digital skills and adapting to new ways of working with communities strongly emerged alongside funding and resource issues as the most acute needs identified by organisations.

The societal impact of COVID-19 and failures in the Home Office policy response were cited as factors likely to lead to a sustained increase in future demand, without attendant stability of long-term core funding.

# Recommendations

Service providers and policy makers need to place measures to mitigate isolation and loneliness at the forefront of responses to COVID-19 and its aftermath.

The people most excluded from services are those with insecure immigration status. Alongside developing provision, there needs to be continued efforts to engage people at all stages in the immigration system and empower them with knowledge and confidence in accessing services and seeking advice on the issues that concern them.

Ongoing efforts, already partly funded in Scotland during lockdown, need to be extended to ensure people's digital connectivity and capacity through provision of devices, internet access and skills.

The Park Inn incident of June 2020 threw into stark relief that, rather than actively seeking to improve people's living conditions during lockdown, the Home Office and its subcontractor put in place measures that directly undermined people's safety and wellbeing. Living in unsuitable accommodation and in enforced poverty cannot in any measure be justified.

Beyond the immediate pandemic response, there is a need to understand and tackle the underlying issues that frame some refugees' lives in Scotland. This could include working with communities to raise awareness of hate crime legislation and reporting mechanisms; identifying local solutions to community tensions; and exploring harassment and abuse in future research and engagement activities.

***“Things are looking up as there are organisations stepping up to help with food parcels and phone top up which helps with being connected on the phone with friends and services.”***

***(Zimbabwean woman, asylum process)***

The report was written by Gary Christie and Helen Baillot. Gary Christie is the Head of Policy, Communications & Communities at Scottish Refugee Council. Helen Baillot is an independent researcher whose work focuses on the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum.

The report was supported by funding from the Respond & Adapt Fund.

We would like to thank everyone who gave their time, experience and views in completing the surveys.

Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity dedicated to providing advice and information to people seeking sanctuary in Scotland.

We have been campaigning for refugee rights since 1985.

**Scottish Refugee Council**

Portland House  
17 Renfield Street  
Glasgow G2 5AH

Tel: 0141 248 9799

Fax: 0141 243 2499

Email: [info@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk)

Visit: [www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk)



[facebook.com/scottishrefugeecouncil](https://facebook.com/scottishrefugeecouncil)



[twitter.com/scotrefcouncil](https://twitter.com/scotrefcouncil)

