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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC ON GLOBAL MIGRATION, MOBILITY, AND IMMIGRATION

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration and population mobility from a global perspective. By integrating migration theory with empirical evidence, it analyzes how an unprecedented public health crisis disrupted migration patterns, reshaped migration governance, and altered the lived experiences of migrant populations. Rather than treating the pandemic as a temporary interruption to global mobility, the study conceptualizes COVID-19 as a structural shock that exposed and intensified pre-existing inequalities within global migration systems.

At the macro level, the analysis shows that international migration flows contracted sharply and were unevenly reconfigured during the pandemic. Temporary, circular, and short-term forms of mobility were disproportionately affected, while return migration and reverse mobility became more prominent. These changes were shaped not only by economic disruptions but also by health risks and institutional constraints, highlighting the limits of purely economic explanations of migration.

At the level of governance, the thesis demonstrates that states responded to the pandemic by strengthening border controls and integrating public health considerations into migration policy. While these measures were often framed as temporary, they reinforced state sovereignty and produced highly selective mobility regimes. At the same time, limited flexibility emerged through differentiated policies targeting specific migrant groups and essential sectors.

At the micro level, the study reveals that the social consequences of the pandemic were highly uneven across migrant populations. Migrants faced increased economic insecurity, restricted access to social protection, experiences of stigmatization and exclusion, and heightened psychological stress. Digital technologies provided partial means of adaptation by enabling

g remote work and transnational communication, but unequal access to these resources further reproduced existing social inequalities.

Overall, the thesis argues that the COVID-19 pandemic did not reverse globalization or international migration, but accelerated existing trends toward selective mobility, risk-based governance, and unequal access to movement. By linking migration theory, policy analysis, and migrant experiences within a single analytical framework, this study contributes to a more integrated understanding of migration dynamics under crisis conditions and offers insights relevant to post-pandemic migration governance.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; international migration; population mobility; migration governance; migrant vulnerability; global inequality

Riassunto

Questa tesi esamina l'impatto della pandemia di COVID-19 sulle migrazioni internazionali e sulla mobilità della popolazione da una prospettiva globale. Integrando la teoria migratoria con evidenze empiriche, analizza come una crisi sanitaria pubblica senza precedenti abbia sconvolto i modelli migratori, ristrutturato la governance delle migrazioni e alterato le esperienze vissute delle popolazioni migranti. Invece di considerare la pandemia come un'interruzione temporanea della mobilità globale, lo studio concettualizza il COVID-19 come uno shock strutturale che ha esposto e intensificato le disuguaglianze preesistenti all'interno dei sistemi migratori globali.

A livello macro, l'analisi mostra che i flussi migratori internazionali si sono fortemente contratti e sono stati riconfigurati in modo diseguale durante la pandemia. Le forme di mobilità temporanea, circolare e a breve termine sono state colpite in modo sproporzionato, mentre le migrazioni di ritorno e la mobilità inversa sono diventate più rilevanti. Questi cambiamenti sono stati plasmati non solo dalle perturbazioni economiche, ma anche dai rischi sanitari e dai vincoli istituzionali, evidenziando i limiti delle spiegazioni puramente economiche della migrazione.

A livello di governance, la tesi dimostra che gli stati hanno risposto alla pandemia rafforzando i controlli alle frontiere e integrando considerazioni di sanità pubblica nella politica migratoria. Sebbene queste misure fossero spesso presentate come temporanee, esse hanno rafforzato la sovranità statale e prodotto regimi di mobilità altamente selettivi. Al contempo, è emersa una limitata flessibilità attraverso politiche differenziate rivolte a specifici gruppi di migranti e settori essenziali.

A livello micro, lo studio rivela che le conseguenze sociali della pandemia sono state fortemente diseguali tra le diverse popolazioni migranti. I migranti hanno affrontato una maggiore insicurezza economica, un accesso

limitato alla protezione sociale, esperienze di stigmatizzazione ed esclusione e un aumento dello stress psicologico. Le tecnologie digitali hanno fornito mezzi parziali di adattamento, consentendo il lavoro a distanza e la comunicazione transnazionale, ma l'accesso diseguale a queste risorse ha ulteriormente riprodotto le disuguaglianze sociali esistenti.

Nel complesso, la tesi sostiene che la pandemia di COVID-19 non ha invertito la globalizzazione o le migrazioni internazionali, ma ha accelerato le tendenze esistenti verso una mobilità selettiva, una governance basata sul rischio e un accesso diseguale al movimento. Collegando la teoria migratoria, l'analisi delle politiche e le esperienze dei migranti in un unico quadro analitico, questo studio contribuisce a una comprensione più integrata delle dinamiche migratorie in condizioni di crisi e offre spunti rilevanti per la governance delle migrazioni nell'era post-pandemica.

Parole chiave: Pandemia di COVID-19; migrazione internazionale; mobilità della popolazione; governance migratoria; vulnerabilità dei migranti; disuguaglianza globale

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context and Motivation for the Research

1.1.1 Global Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, an unprecedented global public health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic—suddenly erupted. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared that the COVID-19 outbreak had become a global pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This crisis quickly spread to more than 200 countries and regions around the world, causing an explosive increase in the number of infections and deaths and posing a major threat to the safety and health of humanity.

The COVID-19 pandemic vividly and profoundly demonstrates that all of humanity is a community with a shared destiny. This crisis has forced countries to recognize that no state or region can retreat into an isolated, self-enclosed island (Walt, 2020). Faced with such a powerful systemic impact, international relations and the model of globalization are facing profound adjustments. As scholars such as Kissinger(2020) have stated, the pandemic may bring lasting changes to the world order, suggesting that the state of globalization based on mutual benefit cannot be easily restored. This new reflection on models of global interconnection has provided a direct cognitive basis for countries to strengthen border control and redefine the relationship between national sovereignty and mobility.

The pandemic posed a serious threat to the stable functioning of the global economy. In a short period of time, global financial markets experienced violent turbulence: Wall Street recorded automatic trading suspensions several times (Zhang et al., 2020), and investors withdrew large amounts of capital from emerging markets, causing a severe liquidity crisis in financial markets. At the same time, global industrial and supply chains were severely affected, and many sectors, such as catering, logistics,

entertainment, manufacturing, and finance suffered heavy losses (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2020).

In response to the economic shock, governments in many countries quickly adopted large-scale fiscal stimulus policies, such as the historic Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act in the United States and the massive rescue plans launched by Germany, the United Kingdom, and France (Elgin et al., 2020). Globally, trillions of dollars were injected into the economy in a short period of time.

These sudden, large-scale changes in economic and fiscal policies have not only reshaped the labor market and global economic opportunities, but have also directly altered the core elements of push-pull theory, thereby reshaping both the incentives and constraints that structure international migration decisions. The pandemic may have intensified economic pressures (unemployment, inflation) in the country of origin, while in the destination country it may have weakened economic attractions (reduced job opportunities, border closures), and even generated an urgent need for immigrants in key sectors (such as healthcare and agriculture) (Benton et al., 2021; OECD, 2020).

In short, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a global systemic crisis, is not only a public health emergency but also a structural crisis that is reshaping global perceptions, economic structures, and governance models. In this context, this study will explore how this crisis, by changing the economic and social environment, strengthening the boundaries of state power, and accelerating the application of new policy instruments, has affected global migration patterns, migration policies, and the lived experiences of individual migrants.

1.1.2 Importance of Migration Studies

With the continuous advancement of globalization, the scale of international migration continues to expand. According to the latest data from 2024 from the International Organization for Migration, the number of international migrants has reached 304 million, accounting for 3.9% of the world's population (IOM, 2024). Cross-border mobility on this scale is not only reshaping the demographic structure, labor market, and cultural composition of various countries, but has also become a key variable influencing the global political and economic landscape. The issue of international migration has thus transcended the traditional sphere of national governance, evolving into a strategic issue of great importance for global sustainable development and the international competitive order, closely linked to the reconstruction of international rule-making power, the distribution of global resources, and civil discourse leadership (Castles et al., 2014).

In the context of globalization and digitalization, population mobility has become a widespread global phenomenon with profound implications for the development of human society. Cross-border migration flows promote the exchange of ideas, cultures, and values, accelerate the integration of transnational economic activities, and influence the organization of global value chains. For example, migrant groups play an irreplaceable role in the economic growth of destination countries: the economic prosperity and cultural diversity of the United States have accumulated over time precisely because of the constant absorption of migrants. For example, migrant groups have long played an important role in the economic development of destination countries. As noted by former U.S. President Bill Clinton (1995) pointed out with regard to Asian immigrants, they have overcome prejudice and obstacles with tenacious determination, contributing to the economic and social strength of the United States and enhancing the country's international prestige.⁹ At the same time,

remittances sent by migrants to their countries of origin have greatly benefited the economic development of developing countries: from 1980 to 2002, global remittances to developing countries rose from \$17.7 billion to \$80 billion, becoming an important source of foreign exchange for many low- and middle-income countries (World Bank, 2003).

However, migration also brings with it a number of social challenges. In times of economic recession, migrant groups tend to be perceived as competitors in the labor market, triggering xenophobic incidents and even exacerbating ethnic conflicts (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). During the 1997–1998 financial crisis in Southeast Asia, Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan repatriated foreign workers en masse: phenomena that reflect the tension between migration policies and social sentiments (Battistella & Asis, 1999). Despite this, the overall contribution of migrants remains undeniable and, in the context of ever-expanding globalization, countries can no longer escape international migration flows. Whether they are countries of origin, destination, or transit, most states actually assume multiple identities: international migration flows intertwine and intersect both within and between countries, making the “science of international migration” an increasingly important field of research in the era of globalization (Castles et al., 2014).

From the point of view of migration motivations, in addition to forced migration caused by wars, disasters, and social unrest, voluntary migration in search of better living conditions has now become the main trend in contemporary transnational mobility (IOM, 2020). Globalization has increased the fluidity of the labor market, making transnational migration an important component of the modern lifestyle: it can be said that the contemporary world has entered the “era of migration.” Overcoming geographical boundaries may seem instantaneous, but overcoming political, cultural, and ethnic boundaries often takes decades or even

generations (Alba & Nee, 2003). When migration reaches a certain scale, it has profound effects, both immediate and long-term, on the political, economic, cultural, and social structures of the countries of origin and destination.

The complexity and long duration of international migration require an interdisciplinary approach. History emphasizes the reconstruction of migratory processes, economics analyzes the motivations and economic impacts, law focuses on legislation and the protection of rights, anthropology reveals the mechanisms of interaction between different cultural groups through field surveys, while sociology in recent years has widely adopted the perspective of “social capital,” analyzing kinship networks, the circulation of information, and the functioning of transnational organizations (Portes, 1998). Together, these different disciplinary approaches illustrate the multidimensional nature of international migration and reflect the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon, which cuts across politics, economics, society, culture, and public health (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015).

International migration is both a product of globalization and a driving force behind its ongoing evolution. It plays an irreplaceable role in shaping the global demographic structure, influencing the world economic order, rebuilding cultural and social relations, and promoting institutional and governance innovation (IOM, 2024). However, migration is a complex process, driven by multiple factors and constrained by historical and spatial conditions. As noted by renowned international migration scholar Alejandro Portes (1997), we should not be under the illusion that there is a “grand theory” capable of explaining all migration phenomena; in the era of globalization, understanding the actual patterns of international migration can only be based on “medium-range theories” and empirical research linked to specific contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified many of these longstanding dynamics, exposing both the structural contributions of migrants and the vulnerabilities embedded in contemporary migration systems. The study of international migration has important theoretical value and practical significance for understanding the structural changes of the era of globalization. It not only helps us to recognize the deep motivations and logic of cross-border population flows, but also provides indispensable knowledge support for global governance, the definition of national strategies, and the sustainable development of humanity (Betts, 2011).

1.1.3 Motivations

The choice of “*The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration patterns, policies, and experiences*” as the topic of this master’s thesis was not random, but the result of careful reflection from both academic and practical perspectives. In defining this topic, the study takes into consideration several dimensions, with the aim of contributing theoretically and empirically to the existing literature on migration.

First, from a theoretical perspective, this research is motivated by the challenges that classical migration theories face in explaining a sudden and global crisis. Over time, academic research has developed a number of established theoretical frameworks, such as push–pull theory (Lee, 1966) and migration network theory (Massey et al., 1993). These theories generally assume that population movements are gradual and relatively rational processes driven primarily by economic and social factors. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this logic of ordinary mobility.

The pandemic is characterized by its sudden onset, global reach, and non-primarily economic nature, thereby placing existing theoretical frameworks under unprecedented stress (de Haas et al., 2020). For example, within the push–pull framework, a country’s level of economic

development is typically considered a major “pull” factor for migrants. During the pandemic, however, some traditionally attractive destination countries experienced severe pressure on healthcare systems, rising mortality, and strict lockdown measures, which reduced their attractiveness and, in some cases, generated new “push” dynamics (Gamlen, 2020). At the same time, “intermediate obstacles” in the migration process—such as geographical distance and transportation costs—were further reinforced by state-led public health interventions, including travel bans and border closures, making migration routes more constrained and uncertain (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique and extreme empirical context in which existing migration theories can be revisited and critically assessed. It allows for an examination of their limitations in explaining a sudden global crisis and offers empirical material for potential theoretical refinement and integration. From an academic perspective, this represents an important opportunity to reflect on the adaptability of migration theories under conditions of systemic shock (Gamlen, 2020).

Secondly, from a practical perspective, COVID-19 has not only been a public health event but has also profoundly reshaped migration governance and border management practices across countries. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many states have adopted restrictive measures that were rare in the past, particularly with regard to cross-border mobility, giving rise to a series of new policy practices (Geddes, 2021). One striking development has been the shift in the priorities of border management, which moved rapidly from predominantly economic, security, or humanitarian considerations toward a strong emphasis on public health and biosecurity (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). Countries increasingly linked the prevention of virus transmission to the regulation of human

mobility, resulting in an unprecedented tightening of border controls within a short period of time.

In addition, many governments introduced emergency governance tools during the pandemic, including health certification systems (such as green passes), mandatory quarantine requirements for entrants, and fast-track visa channels for foreign workers in essential sectors. While these measures were initially designed as temporary responses to an exceptional crisis, they raise an important question: to what extent might governance instruments adopted under emergency conditions become incorporated into longer-term migration management practices in the post-pandemic period? If such a shift were to occur, it could have significant implications for migrants' fundamental rights, humanitarian protection principles, and the broader architecture of international mobility (Tazzioli, 2020). Systematic analysis of these policy transformations is therefore valuable not only for understanding immediate crisis responses, but also for informing future debates on migration governance and policy design.

From the perspective of the subjects of migration themselves, the situations experienced by migrants during the pandemic deserve particular attention. During the global spread of COVID-19, migrants—due to their specific social, economic, and legal positions—often faced multiple and overlapping pressures and risks, resulting in heightened vulnerability. Economically, many migrants are employed in informal, temporary, or low-skilled jobs, including key roles classified as essential work, such as care, logistics, and agriculture. During periods of lockdown, they faced a dual risk: increased exposure to unemployment on the one hand, and continued exposure to health risks on the other, often without adequate social protection or income support (Fasani & Mazza, 2020).

At the social level, during the early stages of the pandemic, migrants from certain countries experienced stigmatization and racial discrimination,

which not only disrupted their daily lives but also further hindered processes of social integration (He et al., 2020). In addition, when accessing public services—particularly healthcare and social assistance—many temporary, irregular, or undocumented migrants encountered significant barriers related to language, legal status, and institutional restrictions (Page et al., 2020). These intertwined economic, social, and institutional challenges make the study of migrants' lived experiences during the pandemic important not only from an academic perspective, but also in terms of broader social responsibility.

Accordingly, this study examines migrants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular attention to their social adaptation and psychological well-being. By doing so, it aims to contribute evidence that can inform more inclusive and context-sensitive policy responses and encourage greater institutional attention to the protection of vulnerable migrant groups.

The choice of COVID-19 and migration as a research topic therefore reflects both theoretical concerns and practical relevance. This research seeks to contribute to ongoing academic debates on migration while also offering insights into evolving forms of global governance and the challenges faced by vulnerable populations in times of crisis (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020).

1.2 Key Research Questions and Thesis Structure

This thesis examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration and population mobility from a global perspective. Building on existing migration theories and recent empirical evidence, the study seeks to understand how an unprecedented global public health crisis has reshaped migration patterns, policy responses, and migrant experiences (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). To achieve this objective, the thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1.How has the COVID-19 pandemic altered global and regional migration patterns? This question focuses on changes in the scale, direction, and composition of international migration during the pandemic, including disruptions to temporary and circular migration, the emergence of return migration, and growing inequalities in mobility across regions.

2.How have government responses to the pandemic reshaped migration policies and border control mechanisms? This question examines how states adjusted immigration policies and border management practices in response to public health risks, with particular attention to travel restrictions, visa regimes, and the balance between security, sovereignty, and flexibility during crisis conditions.

3.How have migrant populations experienced the pandemic in their daily lives, social integration, and mental well-being? This question addresses the lived experiences of migrants during the pandemic, including legal uncertainty, mobility constraints, social exclusion, and psychological stress, highlighting how policy measures translated into everyday challenges for different migrant groups.

To address these questions, the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework and reviews the relevant literature on migration theories and pandemics. It integrates classical migration theories—particularly push–pull theory—with research on public health crises and mobility, and clarifies the key concepts used throughout the study (Czaika et al., 2021). Chapter 3 provides an empirical analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on international migration, examining disruptions to population mobility, adjustments in migration policies, and the structural consequences for migration patterns and mobility inequality. Chapter 4 examines migrant vulnerability across three interrelated dimensions: economic and employment insecurity, challenges to social integration and mental well-being, and the role of digital technologies in shaping everyday

life and transnational connections during the pandemic. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study by summarizing the key findings and providing policy recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes the theoretical and analytical foundations for examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration. It combines classical migration theories with contemporary research on pandemics and mobility in order to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding migration dynamics under global health crises (Skeldon, 2021). The chapter also clarifies key concepts that guide the empirical analysis in subsequent chapters.

The chapter is structured into three main parts. Section 2.1 reviews core migration theories, beginning with classical push–pull theory and its extension to pandemic conditions (Lee, 1966; Gamlen, 2020), followed by transnationalism and social network approaches (Vertovec, 2009; Massey et al., 1993). These approaches are selected because they capture different but complementary dimensions of migration decision-making, ranging from economic incentives and structural constraints to social embeddedness and transnational ties.

Section 2.2 examines existing research on pandemics and migration, with particular attention to how public health crises disrupt population mobility and reshape migration governance. By reviewing studies on previous epidemics as well as emerging literature on COVID-19, this section conceptualizes the pandemic as a structural shock that simultaneously affects economic conditions, health risks, and institutional barriers to mobility (Zolberg, 1989; de Haas et al., 2020). This perspective bridges classical migration theory with the empirical realities of pandemic-induced mobility disruptions.

Section 2.3 defines the key concepts employed throughout the thesis, including migration patterns, migration policies, and migrant experiences. Clarifying these concepts ensures analytical consistency and provides a shared conceptual basis for interpreting the empirical findings presented

in Chapter 3 (Czaika & de Haas, 2013). Taken together, this chapter lays the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped international migration dynamics and mobility inequalities.

2.1 Review of Migration Theories

2.1.1 Push-Pull Theory

The origin of push-pull theory can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, when Ernst Georg Ravenstein, a German-British geographer, published his paper "The Laws of Migration" (Ravenstein, 1885). In the paper, Ravenstein investigated questions such as who migrates, where they migrate to, and why they migrate. Based on migration patterns in 21 countries, he proposed laws of migration, laying the foundation for modern theories of population mobility. Subsequently, scholars from disciplines such as population geography, political economy, and development economics put forward a series of related theories. These theories still serve as fundamental frameworks for analyzing changes in mobility in the face of global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Castles et al., 2014).

Ravenstein believed that the fundamental reason for migration is the desire for a better life (Ravenstein, 1889). In overpopulated countries or regions, an oversupply of labor leads to low wages, prompting people to move to countries or regions with more developed industries and commerce, where more resources and higher wages are available. In addition, heavy taxation, oppressive laws, inharmonious social environments, unfavorable climates, and the slave trade were all factors influencing population movement. These "push" and "pull" factors, which may primarily revolve around economics during peacetime, can be replaced by factors such as "health risks" or "medical resources" during public health crises (Benton et al., 2021).

Ravenstein also summarized six laws of migration (Skeldon, 2021):

Under normal circumstances, migration is a gradual process from nearby to farther places.

The scale of migration is proportional to the distance. Short-distance migration is most common, but long-distance migration involves more people than short-distance migration.

Population movement is bidirectional. Every migration flow generates a weak counter-flow.

The growth of large cities comes at the expense of rural population decline. Without external resources, urban development would be very slow or even regress.

Women, especially those born in large cities, dominate the migration process.

Population movement is related to technology and the economy. Countries with rapidly developing manufacturing and commerce will see sustained increases in migration, as migration signifies progress, while stagnation signifies decline.

Ravenstein analyzed population movement from perspectives such as distance, economy, technological conditions, culture, and gender. Although he did not categorize these influencing factors in detail during his research, his paper laid the theoretical foundation for later studies, marking the starting point of push-pull theory in demography (Lee, 1966).

2.1.2 Push–Pull Theory and Migration under COVID-19

Push–pull theory provides a foundational framework for understanding international migration by distinguishing between factors that encourage individuals to leave their countries of origin (push factors) and those that attract them to destination countries (pull factors) (Lee, 1966). In

economic analyses of migration, push factors are commonly associated with adverse labor market conditions, low income levels, and limited employment opportunities, while pull factors include higher wages, better job prospects, and improved living standards in destination countries (Massey et al., 1993).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional economic push–pull mechanisms were significantly altered by the scale and simultaneity of the global shock. Income and employment shocks emerged as a central push factor as lockdowns, business closures, and contractions in service sectors disproportionately affected migrant-intensive industries (Fasani & Mazza, 2020). Sudden job losses, reduced working hours, and heightened income uncertainty in destination countries weakened conventional pull factors and, in some cases, transformed them into push forces, prompting return or onward migration (IOM, 2024).

At the same time, health-related considerations became a critical component of migration decision-making. The pandemic introduced new and unevenly distributed health risks across countries, making access to healthcare systems, public health capacity, and perceived safety salient pull factors (Gamlen, 2020). Conversely, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, high infection rates, or limited access to medical services functioned as push factors, discouraging both new migration and continued residence in destination countries.

Migration outcomes during the pandemic were not determined by push–pull factors alone but were strongly mediated by policy barriers acting as intervening obstacles. Visa regimes, border closures, travel bans, and quarantine requirements significantly constrained mobility, often overriding individual economic or health-related preferences (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). These policy instruments operated as mechanisms of extra-territorial control, selectively enabling or preventing migration and thereb

y amplifying inequalities in access to mobility (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). Recent evidence suggests that these crisis-induced policy shifts have had a lasting impact; as noted in the International Migration Outlook 2025 (OECD, 2025), the permanent nature of some administrative and digital border controls has continued to reshape the selection and composition of global migration flows long after the public health emergency subsided.

By integrating economic shocks, health risks, and policy barriers into a unified push–pull framework, this chapter conceptualizes migration during the COVID-19 pandemic as the outcome of interacting incentives and constraints. This approach moves beyond a purely economic interpretation of migration and highlights the central role of institutions and governance in shaping mobility under crisis conditions (Geddes, 2021). The resulting framework provides a coherent theoretical basis for analyzing how pandemic-related disruptions translated into the empirical patterns of migration change examined in the subsequent chapter.

2.1.3 Transnationalism and Migration Studies

Since the 1990s, migration scholars have increasingly moved beyond analytical frameworks centered on the nation-state, as such frameworks have proven insufficient for explaining the complexity of contemporary global migration. Against this background, transnationalism emerged as a key theoretical perspective for understanding cross-border population movements and their social, political, and economic consequences. Transnational migration refers to “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al., 1994, p. 7). Rather than viewing migration as a unidirectional movement followed by settlement and assimilation, transnationalism emphasizes that migrants construct enduring “social fields” that span geographic, cultural, and political borders. In this sense, transnationalism can be understood as “the multiple

relations and interactions linking people and institutions across the borders of nation-states” (Vertovec, 2009).

As a major theoretical innovation in migration studies, transnationalism has attracted sustained attention in European and North American scholarship. Existing research has expanded across several interrelated dimensions. First, studies examine the formation and transformation of transnational socio-cultural communities, including diasporic identities, religious networks, cultural reconstruction, and consumption practices. Second, scholars focus on the economic dimensions of transnationalism, such as remittances, migrant entrepreneurship, transnational enterprises, and migrants’ roles in the economic reconstruction of their ancestral or home countries. Third, political transnationalism has become a central concern, encompassing migrants’ political participation, interactions with sending-state institutions, and involvement in global political networks. Finally, research on transnational family strategies explores legal status acquisition, gendered labor migration, child-rearing arrangements, and cross-border remittance practices. Together, these strands highlight the multi-layered and multi-sited nature of transnational social life.

Although all modern states are defined by clear territorial and political boundaries, large-scale migration has increasingly blurred the relationship between nation and nation-state. Under conditions of transnational migration, the nation often extends beyond territorial borders and takes the form of a global diaspora. Consequently, research on migrants’ political choices from a transnational perspective frequently centers on experiences of identity formation between sending and receiving countries. Within social spaces that transcend the territorial limits of nation-states, the cultural and political characteristics of both ancestral/home countries and countries of residence intersect with newly emerging transnational practices. This convergence raises fundamental questions about the assumed linkage between

en territory, nation, and political community.

Transnational networks connect migrants simultaneously to multiple social and political spaces, challenging the expectation that political communities demand singular loyalty from their members. As a result, multiple memberships and overlapping allegiances complicate the relationship between rights and identity, culture and politics, and state and nation. In this context, the concept of citizenship itself becomes contested, prompting scholars to ask whether transnational communities represent an institutionalized form of multiple belonging (Glick Schiller et al., 1992).

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscores the analytical significance of transnationalism. During periods of mobility restriction and border closure, physical forms of cross-border movement, such as travel and face-to-face visits were severely constrained. However, migrants' transnational engagement did not disappear; instead, it was reconfigured through non-physical means, including digital communication, remote work, online political participation, and continued remittance practices. This shift highlights the resilience and adaptability of transnational linkages under conditions of global crisis (Pries, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, the pandemic thus serves as a critical test of transnationalism, demonstrating that transnational social fields are not reducible to physical mobility alone but are sustained through diverse social, economic, and symbolic connections (IOM, 2024).

In analyzing the political and economic dimensions of cross-border engagement, it is important to distinguish between “trans-state” and “transnational” processes. While this distinction may be less critical in the study of kinship ties, it becomes essential when examining state–migrant relations and political mobilization (Faist, 2000). States cannot directly compel the economic or political participation of citizens residing outside their territorial jurisdiction.

As a result, migrant-sending governments often invoke discourses of national solidarity to encourage remittances, investment, and political engagement among their overseas populations. The visit by the Mexican president to migrant communities in California in 2001 exemplifies such a transnational nationalist project (FitzGerald, 2004). In this context, nationalist rhetoric becomes a strategic tool precisely because migrants are located outside the state's territorial borders while remaining within the imagined boundaries of the nation.

Transnational nationalism manifests in two principal forms. The first is transborder homeland nationalism, referring to migrants who reside abroad while maintaining political and emotional identification with their ancestral nation. The second is dual nationalism, in which migrants claim political belonging to both the sending and receiving nations. Dual nationality thus implies simultaneous identification with multiple national polities, even when these nations are institutionally distinct. Within this framework, the concept of diaspora acquires a specific transnational meaning, capturing forms of political, cultural, and symbolic attachment that extend beyond state borders. Such multiple identifications may foster openness and pluralism, but they also raise concerns regarding political loyalty, particularly during periods of crisis.

In migrant-receiving countries, responses to transnational nationalism tend to follow two divergent paths. On the one hand, immigrants' transnational political engagements are sometimes viewed with suspicion, based on concerns that migrants are "physically present but politically elsewhere," especially in the aftermath of major security events or global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Huntington, 2004; He et al., 2020). On the other hand, more pluralist perspectives regard transnational political identification as a normal and legitimate expression of democratic participation. Nevertheless, even within liberal democratic contexts,

national-level thinking continues to shape state behavior. Immigrants' political loyalty may remain subject to doubt even after naturalization, as illustrated by the case of Wen Ho Lee, where ethnic identity functioned as a transnational analytical category overriding formal citizenship.

Overall, transnational migration studies emphasize the transnational engagement of non-state actors—migrants, migrant groups, and their organizations—and the implications of such engagement for state actors. As forms of low politics such as migration, culture, and social interaction gain prominence in an era of deepening global interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977), transnational practices increasingly influence policy-making, public attitudes, and international cooperation. During the COVID-19 crisis, migrants' cross-border engagement—ranging from information exchange to medical and humanitarian assistance—further demonstrated the political significance of transnational social fields (IOM, 2024). Transnationalism thus provides a critical framework for analyzing how bottom-up cross-border practices reshape power relations, social organization, and the evolving relationship between states and societies.

2.1.4 Social Network Theory

Social network theory originated in the 1950s within the field of sociological research, initially applied to study and address sociological issues. As the theory evolved and deepened, it demonstrated strong explanatory power and significant value in other disciplines as well.

Regarding the earliest conceptualization of social networks, scholars hold differing views. Some scholars believe the concept of social relationship networks was first introduced by British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1940) in his article "On Social Structure," where he used social relationship networks to explain social distribution and support. Thomas Ritter posited that social networks refer to relatively enduring and stable social relationships between individuals. With the development of social

network theory, the actors within these networks have expanded from independent individuals to include enterprises and organizations, continuously refining and expanding to form a holistic perspective. Researchers such as Michael Song proposed that social networks are sets of network nodes connected by various social relationships (such as emotional or instrumental ties). Davern, on the other hand, defined social networks as specific connections between individuals, emphasizing both individual social relationships and the overall network structure. Wellman described social networks as relational patterns linking social members together, highlighting their holistic characteristics (Wellman, 1988).

From an academic historical perspective, the social network theory of migration began with the research by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) on Polish peasants migrating to Europe and the United States. The conceptualization of migration networks as a form of “social capital”, where migration networks benefit migrants, was proposed by Massey et al. (1987), a Princeton University professor and former president of the American Sociological Association, among others in 1987, building upon the foundation of social capital theory.

Social networks refer to interpersonal connections established between migrants, earlier migrants, and non-migrants in places of origin or settlement, based on kinship, friendship, or shared regional ties. This theory emphasizes the impact of social networks constructed on foundations such as blood ties, regional connections, and emotional bonds on migration (Massey et al., 1993). The formation of such networks reduces migration risks, leading to the expansion of migration networks and an increase in the back-and-forth movement of migrants between places of origin and destination. The establishment and maintenance of these networks require long-term interpersonal relationships, as well as

regular exchanges of value among actors, a pattern sustained by the inherent cyclical nature of the networks themselves.

In the unique context of the global crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of social networks has been amplified:

1. Risk Mitigation and Information Channels: Faced with travel restrictions, unemployment risks, and medical uncertainties, social networks became the primary channels for migrants to access critical information on border policies, employment opportunities, and medical resources. This effectively reduced the uncertainties and costs associated with migration during the crisis (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

2. Crisis Support and Resilience: When state support was insufficient or migrants experienced exclusion, social networks (such as family remittances or mutual aid organizations) became vital resources for survival and maintaining transnational connections, demonstrating the resilience of migrant communities in crisis (IOM, 2024). This resilience is further underscored by the fact that global remittances remained surprisingly stable, serving as a private social safety net for millions of households during the economic downturn (World Bank, 2024).

3. Challenges to Network Maintenance: At the same time, pandemic-induced social distancing and the disruption of international mobility posed unprecedented challenges to the maintenance and value-exchange patterns of these networks (Skeldon, 2021).

However, as noted in the International Migration Outlook 2025 (OECD, 2025), the widespread adoption of digital communication tools has partially compensated for the lack of physical presence, evolving into a new form of "digital social capital" that continues to shape migration patterns in the post-pandemic era.

Therefore, social network theory provides an essential theoretical tool for this study to analyze how migrants maintained social capital under physical isolation during the pandemic, responded to sudden risks, and how migration networks underwent structural adjustments amidst the crisis.

2.2 Existing Research on Pandemics and Migration

2.2.1 Previous Epidemics and Population Mobility

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, major global pandemics have mainly included Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012, and the Ebola outbreak between 2013 and 2014. These health crises represent important precedents for understanding the relationship between epidemics and population mobility (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020).

Existing studies indicate that these epidemics led to temporary disruptions in travel and mobility, primarily through measures such as travel advisories, quarantine requirements, and limited border controls. However, their broader impact on migration systems remained relatively limited (Beutels et al., 2009). Historically, epidemics either tended to be concentrated in poorer and less developed countries, whose economic activities were weakly integrated into global industrial chains and therefore did not generate significant negative spillover effects, or they involved relatively simple transmission mechanisms and limited geographical spread. As a result, these epidemics did not lead to large-scale infections, and their impact on global production networks and international migration was relatively small (IOM, 2024).

Moreover, most research on SARS, H1N1, MERS, and Ebola was conducted from a public health or epidemiological perspective. Population

movement was mainly examined as a factor influencing disease transmission rather than as an independent subject of migration studies (Findlay, 2011). Empirical analyses focusing on migration decisions, migration volume, or changes in migration structures during these epidemics remain scarce. The limited geographical scope and relatively short duration of these outbreaks further reduced their long-term influence on migration patterns.

Overall, previous epidemics demonstrate that public health crises can affect population mobility in the short term, but they did not fundamentally reshape global migration systems, nor did they generate a substantial body of migration-focused academic literature (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). This limitation provides an important point of comparison for understanding the distinctive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2.2 COVID-19 and Mobility Restrictions

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant turning point in the relationship between public health crises and population mobility. Unlike previous epidemics, COVID-19 triggered large-scale and prolonged mobility restrictions at both national and international levels (Geddes, 2021). Governments around the world implemented measures such as lockdowns, travel bans, border closures, suspension of international flights, and mandatory quarantine periods.

A growing body of literature has examined the impact of these measures on mobility using diverse data sources, including mobile phone location data, transportation statistics, and border control records. Early studies consistently show a sharp decline in both domestic and international mobility during the initial phases of the pandemic (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). These reductions were often uneven across regions and social groups, reflecting differences in occupational structure, income level, and legal status. As noted in the International Migration Outlook 2025 (OECD,

2025), while general mobility levels have largely rebounded, the "scarring effect" of these restrictions persists in the form of more complex visa requirements and enhanced digital surveillance at borders.

Although much of the early research focused on mobility rather than migration, these findings are highly relevant to migration studies. Mobility restrictions directly affected migrants' ability to move, return, or settle, and disrupted established migration routes (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). In many cases, migration was postponed, redirected, or transformed into irregular forms due to increased barriers to movement.

2.2.3 COVID-19 as a Structural Shock to Migration

An increasing number of studies conceptualize COVID-19 as a structural or exogenous shock to global migration systems. From this perspective, the pandemic did not simply reduce migration flows temporarily, but altered the conditions under which migration decisions are made. Health risks, access to medical resources, and government responses to the pandemic emerged as new or intensified push and pull factors.

At the same time, mobility restrictions significantly strengthened intervening obstacles, such as legal barriers, transportation constraints, and policy uncertainty. These changes affected different migrant groups in unequal ways, depending on factors such as age, occupation, and migration status. As a result, the pandemic reshaped migration patterns by influencing not only the scale of migration, but also its direction, timing, and composition (Czaika & de Haas, 2013).

In summary, existing research suggests that while previous epidemics had limited and short-lived effects on population mobility, COVID-19 represents an unprecedented global crisis with profound implications for migration (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). This literature provides an important foundation for analyzing how pandemics interact with

migration theories and for examining the structural changes in migration dynamics under conditions of prolonged uncertainty.

2.3 Conceptual Definitions

To avoid conceptual ambiguity and ensure logical consistency in subsequent analysis, it is necessary to define several core concepts addressed in this paper. These definitions primarily focus on three aspects: “migration patterns”, “migration policies”, and “migration experiences”.

2.3.1 Migration Patterns

The term “migration patterns” as used herein refers to the overall characteristics and regularities exhibited by population movements across national or regional borders within specific historical and institutional contexts (Castles et al., 2014). These include the scale, direction, duration, frequency of movement, as well as return or reverse migration flows.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper focuses on the dynamic shifts in migration patterns rather than static migration stocks, reflecting what recent literature describes as the "post-pandemic mobility transition" (OECD, 2025).

On one hand, migration patterns manifest in changes to the scale of international population flows, such as interruptions, reductions, or resumptions of cross-border movements. On the other hand, they reflect adjustments in flow directions and forms, including the return of temporary migrants, reverse migration, and the contraction of intra-regional mobility. By analyzing changes in migration patterns before and after the pandemic, this paper explores how public health crises reshape the fundamental structure of global population movements.

2.3.2 Migration Policies

“Migration policies” in this paper refer to a series of institutional arrangements and administrative measures formulated and implemented at the national or regional level to regulate, manage, and control cross-border population movements (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). These primarily include visa systems, entry and residence permits, border control measures, asylum and refugee policies, as well as temporary policy adjustments related to population mobility.

Within this analytical framework, migration policies are viewed not only as routine administrative tools but also as critical governance instruments through which states respond to public health risks, economic pressures, and political demands in specific contexts. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, migration policies became highly intertwined with public health measures, emerging as a form of "biopolitical border governance" (Tazzioli, 2020). This paper focuses on the phased changes in immigration policies during the pandemic and their impact on population mobility patterns, rather than conducting a systematic comparison of the long-term evolution of immigration systems across countries.

2.3.3 Migrant Experiences

The term “migrant experiences” as used herein refers to the comprehensive economic, social, and psychological experiences encountered by individual migrants during and after their migration journey (Anthias, 2021). This encompasses employment status, residency stability, social integration, livelihood security, and perceptions of uncertainty and risk.

Migrant experiences were influenced by multiple factors during the COVID-19 pandemic. On one hand, the pandemic has reduced employment opportunities, destabilized incomes, and limited access to social services, ex

acerbating economic vulnerability among migrant populations. On the other hand, border closures, travel disruptions, and policy uncertainties have profoundly impacted migrants' psychological security and social integration. By examining migrant experiences, this paper aims to complement macro-level analyses of migration patterns and policies with micro-level insights, thereby presenting a more comprehensive picture of the pandemic's overall impact on migrant communities.

Chapter 3: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on International Population Mobility and Migration Policies

As a global public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected international population mobility systems and national migration policies. For a long time, cross-border mobility in the context of globalization has been characterized by high frequency and relative openness. The outbreak of the pandemic, however, subjected this mobility system to a systemic shock within a short period (Arar & Sterian, 2021). With pandemic containment as their primary objective, countries swiftly implemented a series of policy measures restricting international mobility. This led to a sharp decline in global population flows and, to some extent, reshaped the logic and practices of migration governance. This chapter analyzes the pandemic's impact on global migration and population mobility through three dimensions: the disruption of international population flows, adjustments to immigration policies, and structural changes in mobility patterns.

3.1 The Abrupt Disruption of International Population Mobility Amid the Pandemic Shock

3.1.1 International Travel Restrictions and the Sudden Halt in Cross-Border Mobility

The outbreak of COVID-19 delivered an unprecedented shock to the global population mobility system. To curb cross-border transmission of the virus, governments worldwide swiftly implemented stringent international travel restrictions in the early stages of the pandemic. These measures included border closures, suspension of international flights, entry bans, and enhanced quarantine requirements. These measures swiftly disrupted the highly mobile patterns of globalization, causing abrupt and widespread interruptions in international population flows. Unlike previous shifts in migration triggered by wars, economic crises, or regional conflicts, this d

isruption exhibited distinct global and synchronous characteristics. In the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in Figure 3.1 nearly all countries implemented international travel restrictions, resulting in a global contraction of mobility (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

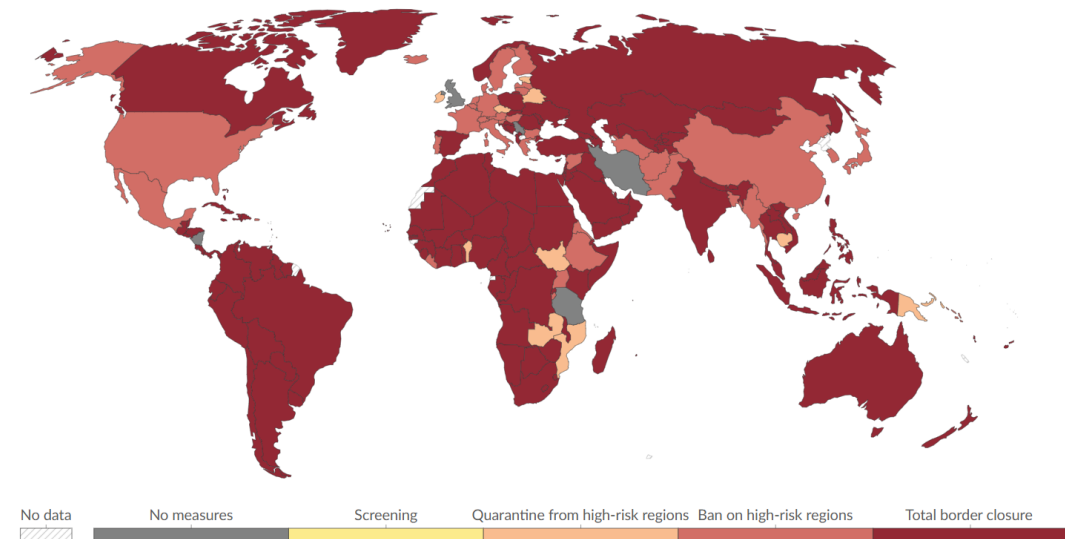


Figure 3.1 International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic (as of May 2020)

Note: The figure illustrates the types and intensity of international travel restrictions implemented by countries worldwide, ranging from screening measures to complete border closures.

Source: Our World in Data (2020)

In specific policy implementation, some countries adopted extremely stringent entry restrictions, even prohibiting entry for all non-nationals for extended periods. For instance, the Colombian government suspended disembarkation for passengers arriving from abroad for entry or transit purposes, subsequently providing a relatively restrictive interpretation of the term abroad in subsequent announcements. Although Colombia avoided rigid nationality-based exclusions, it explicitly stated that entry was generally discouraged for all individuals except those recognized as citizens under immigration and border laws, and specific entities visiting

for diplomatic or other exceptional reasons. Countries adopting similar policy orientations were far from rare during the pandemic.

Following the declaration of a state of emergency in certain regions, Kyrgyzstan imposed strict restrictions on the movement of all domestic and foreign vehicles, granting exceptions only for cargo transport and diplomatic vehicles (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020). However, such vehicles and their accompanying personnel remain subject to stringent health inspections. As the pandemic situation worsened, Kyrgyzstan gradually expanded the state of emergency to cover most of its territory. This effectively imposed indirect restrictions on the entry of vehicles nationwide, with even stricter measures targeting foreign nationals and their vehicles. Argentina adopted more precise policy language, stipulating in its entry control measures that non-resident foreign nationals are prohibited from entering the country through ports, airports, international border crossings, checkpoints, or any other entry points during specified periods to reduce infection risks (Government of Argentina, 2020; OECD, 2020). Regarding land borders, Argentina imposes no restrictions on its citizens or residents entering by private vehicle. However, it implements a quota system limiting the daily number of residents permitted to enter via air and land public transportation. In essence, this measure still constitutes a strict restriction on the entry rights of non-citizens.

In summary, despite differences in legal wording, target populations, and enforcement methods among the aforementioned countries, their entry control measures exhibit a high degree of logical consistency. Specifically, they employ a judgment framework centered on public health risks to clearly differentiate entry rights between their own citizens and non-citizens (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020), thereby rapidly reducing the scale of cross-border movement during the early stages of the pandemic.

Estonia's border measures exhibit a degree of regionally differentiated management. The country imposed additional restrictions on freedom of movement in certain island regions, permitting entry only to individuals possessing permanent residence on the island and exhibiting no COVID-19 symptoms (Government of Estonia, 2020). This measure effectively imposed non-discriminatory yet conditional entry controls on island residents, with the conditions primarily centered on health status requirements and epidemic prevention testing standards.

Compared to comprehensive entry bans, some countries opted to control cross-border movement during different pandemic phases by requiring incoming travelers to comply with preventive health measures. Such measures typically applied during the initial outbreak or when epidemic control had achieved phased success, as nations sought a relative balance between public health security and human rights protection. Peru announced a temporary border closure on March 16, 2020, imposing a 15-calendar-day quarantine on all individuals who had entered the country prior to that date (IOM, 2020a). The specific quarantine method varied based on the severity of the pandemic in the international traveler's country of origin, encompassing both home quarantine and centralized quarantine in dedicated epidemic prevention facilities.

Moldova employed relatively general policy language, emphasizing restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms through special entry-exit systems. However, its practical implementation revealed a de facto 7-day quarantine for citizens and a phased entry system with 15-day quarantine for non-citizens (IOM, 2020b). San Marino explicitly states that natural persons should, in principle, avoid entering or leaving the territory of the Republic and moving within it, unless they can demonstrate work-related necessity, special needs, or the purpose of entering a residence, temporary accommodation, or family reunification (Government of San Marino,

2020). Under this system design, individuals exercising their right to enter for family reunification or returning to their residence receive relatively prioritized protection. Guatemala's published measures impose more detailed restrictions on the right to freedom of movement, applicable to all individuals including residents and covering personnel, crew members, passengers, and all land transport vehicles. Under these regulations, no one may cross borders or move after 4:00 PM daily. Those entering before 4:00 PM must undergo a 7 day centralized or self-quarantine observation period as directed by the national health authorities (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2020). From a comparative perspective, this policy does not entirely deny the legitimacy of cross-border movement. Instead, it reorders freedom of movement under public health objectives through differentiated designs of quarantine periods, health assessments, and entry conditions. This reflects a governance approach seeking institutional balance between epidemic prevention needs and fundamental rights.

As the pandemic continues to spread into the second quarter of 2021, some countries have begun implementing more refined entry systems under strict prevention and control measures. Led by EU nations, certain countries now require travelers to provide standardized health and safety certificates prior to arrival. For instance, individuals entering France must present a negative PCR test result issued within 48 hours by a medical institution recognized by the French health authorities. Germany, however, imposes an additional requirement: travelers must undergo a second test within 72 hours of arrival. If both tests yield negative results, they are deemed compliant with entry standards and exempt from further medical observation or additional health certificates. At the EU level, efforts are underway to harmonize pandemic prevention standards across member states to reduce compliance costs and avoid policy implementation challenges caused by inconsistent entry requirements. Consequently, from

late May to mid-June, the EU progressively rolled out a unified “Digital Green Certificate” for its citizens, replacing existing national entry protocols (European Commission, 2021). Member states implementing restrictions on free movement must now notify other member states and EU institutions 48 hours in advance.

Additionally, countries such as Mexico, Serbia, South Africa, Greece, and the United Kingdom have generally adopted entry management approaches combining health certificates with preventive screening measures (IOM, 2021). In practice, these countries typically require international travelers to present both health certificates and antigen or PCR test results at entry points. Failure to provide compliant documentation may result in mandatory quarantine. Travelers must also complete health declaration forms, which are usually distributed by staff on international transport vehicles like flights or filled out and submitted upon arrival at the destination's international port. This phase of entry management reflects a shift from blanket closures toward refined risk-based approaches. Countries no longer rely solely on nationality or residency status as criteria, instead implementing tiered and conditional management of cross-border movement through technical measures such as test results, health certificates, and information declarations.

The implementation of these policy measures has made it difficult for international migrants, short-term travelers, and transnational professionals to enter or exit countries as originally planned. International tourism, student exchanges, business interactions, and transnational labor mobility have all been severely impacted, leading to a sharp decline in global air traffic and international personnel flows within a short period. Among these, temporary and short-term cross-border movements have been particularly hard hit. International students were unable to enter countries on schedule for their studies, while the movement of multinational corporation emplo

yees and business personnel was forced to halt. Supply chains and service networks reliant on cross-border mobility faced disruptions. Simultaneously, some immigrants already in destination countries became stranded due to flight cancellations or border closures, creating a phenomenon of “involuntary stranding” that further heightened uncertainty at the individual and family levels (Guadagno, 2020).

A synthesis of these policy practices reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic did not merely trigger random tightening of immigration policies across nations. Instead, it accelerated the global proliferation of a governance logic for cross-border mobility centered on public health risk assessment, manifesting highly similar policy orientations within diverse national institutional frameworks. From a policy logic perspective, public health risks have become the primary justification for implementing travel restrictions, with border controls being redefined to serve critical functions in safeguarding national security and public health (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). Against this backdrop, international mobility is no longer viewed solely as an economic or social activity but is constructed as a potential source of risk (Tazzioli, 2020). This shift has not only led to a sharp contraction in cross-border population movements but also signifies the restoration of state dominance in the governance of global population flows (Geddes, 2021). Overall, the international travel restrictions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic caused a systemic disruption in global population mobility within a short timeframe. This exposed the vulnerability of a global system highly dependent on cross-border flows when confronting public health crises, laying the groundwork for subsequent adjustments to immigration policies and shifts in population mobility patterns.

3.1.2 Systematic Disruption of Temporary and Circular Migration

Amidst international travel restrictions and border closures, temporary and circular migrants have borne the brunt of disruption, emerging as one of the most visibly affected groups in global population mobility during the pandemic. Compared to permanent migrants, these groups rely heavily on the continuity of cross-border movement, with their work, study, and living arrangements typically built upon frequent travel between their countries of origin and destination. Consequently, the sudden tightening of border controls has directly disrupted their established patterns of movement.

First, the cross-border movement of seasonal workers has been severely impacted. Many countries' agriculture, food processing, and construction sectors have long relied on foreign seasonal workers, yet pandemic-era entry restrictions prevented large numbers of laborers from arriving on schedule (OECD, 2020). This not only caused labor shortages in certain industries but also forced destination countries to reassess their structural dependence on transnational labor (Fasani & Mazza 2020). Simultaneously, sending countries faced reduced remittances and rising employment pressures due to disrupted labor exports, transmitting the pandemic's impact across borders.

Second, the mobility of international students and short-term trainees has also suffered systemic disruptions. University closures, visa processing delays, and uncertain entry policies have prevented many international students from studying or completing their degrees abroad as planned (UNESCO, 2021). Some students have been forced to defer enrollment or switch to online learning, altering both the scale and format of transnational educational mobility (Arar & Sterian, 2021). These changes not only impact individual students' development paths but also have long-

term implications for higher education systems reliant on international tuition fees and talent reserves.

Additionally, the movement of temporary business migrants and transnational professionals faced significant restrictions. Personnel assignments by multinational corporations, short-term project collaborations, and international conference exchanges declined sharply during the pandemic, with some cross-border work shifting to remote modes. While digital technologies partially mitigated the impact of mobility constraints, they did not fully replace face-to-face cross-border interactions, particularly in fields requiring on-site operations or high levels of collaboration.

Notably, border closures not only prevented new temporary migrants from entering destination countries but also restricted the return and circulation of existing migrants (IOM, 2024). Some temporary migrants already in destination countries chose to extend their stays due to fears of being unable to re-enter, forcing the original “circular” mobility pattern to shift toward relatively static residency. This transformation further blurred the boundaries between temporary migration and long-term residency, posing new challenges to immigration management systems (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

By disrupting cross-border mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic has systematically undermined the operational foundations of temporary and circular migration. The instability and institutional constraints faced by this group during the pandemic not only highlight the heavy reliance of global population movements on open borders but also reveal the limitations of existing migration systems in responding to sudden public health crises.

3.2 Adjustments to Immigration Policies and Enhanced Border Controls During the Pandemic

Against the backdrop of a sharp decline in global population mobility, governments worldwide have successively adjusted immigration and border management policies to address public health risks and domestic socioeconomic pressures. These policies reflect both a heightened emphasis on sovereignty and security during times of crisis, as well as a degree of temporary and selective characteristics.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, border control has been repositioned at the core of national governance. Public health security has become a key justification for legitimizing strict border restrictions, with states intensifying management of cross-border movement through entry bans, health screenings, and quarantine systems. In this process, the role of national sovereignty in immigration governance has significantly increased, as cross-border movement is no longer viewed as routine economic and social activity but rather as a potential source of risk (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020).

This trend was particularly pronounced in asylum and humanitarian migration. Due to border closures and restricted administrative procedures, many countries suspended or significantly slowed the processing of asylum applications and refugee resettlement programs (UNHCR, 2021), leaving those seeking international protection facing greater uncertainty. The pandemic thus became not only a public health crisis but also, to some extent, exacerbated pre-existing humanitarian challenges (Guadagno, 2020).

Overall, the pandemic has prompted countries to rapidly strengthen border controls, tightly linking migration policies with national security and public health, highlighting the dominant role of states in global mobility governance (Geddes, 2021).

Despite the overall tightening of border controls, countries have demonstrated some flexibility in immigration policy practices to address practical needs. To address the issue of stranded individuals caused by international travel restrictions, some countries have implemented automatic extensions or simplified renewal procedures for temporary visas and residence permits, preventing immigrants from falling into illegal residency status due to inability to depart. For example, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) issued a notice regarding extensions of lawful status for nonimmigrants stranded in the United States (USCIS, 2020). The notice stated that most nonimmigrants may apply for an extension of stay (EOS) or change their status to remain in the United States. USCIS is currently accepting and processing extension applications, provided they are submitted before the current status expires. Applicants whose submitted materials show a pending status with USCIS are not considered unlawfully present. The German Federal Ministry of the Interior announced that individuals whose Schengen visas expired but who are temporarily unable to leave Germany due to the pandemic will not be held liable for illegal overstays (Federal Ministry of the Interior [BMI], 2020). They are exempt from applying for residence permits until June 30, 2020. Those with expired Schengen visas remain permitted to work until June 30. In the Italian context, the government implemented the automatic extension of residence permits through specific legislative decrees, such as the *Cura Italia* and *Rilancio* decrees, which provided legal certainty to foreign nationals during the closure of immigration offices (Government of Italy, 2020). Departure will be permitted once the pandemic eases or restrictions are lifted. While these measures vary in form across different national legal frameworks, they share a common policy objective: alleviating uncertainty regarding the legal status of immigrants during the pandemic through temporary administrative

adjustments. This reflects a short-term shift in immigration management toward pragmatism and humanitarianism amid the crisis.

Simultaneously, some countries have selectively relaxed policies for specific groups to ensure the normal functioning of critical sectors. Fields such as healthcare, agriculture, and food supply are widely recognized as essential industries (Fasani & Mazza, 2020)., with migrant workers in these sectors gaining priority access to entry or work permits. This “differentiated opening” policy stands out against the backdrop of overall border tightening and reflects the functional role of immigrants in national economic and social operations.

However, most such policies are distinctly temporary in nature. Their scope and duration remain highly contingent on pandemic developments and domestic political considerations, making it difficult to fundamentally alter the structural constraints of immigration systems.

3.3 Structural Impacts of the Pandemic on International Migration Patterns

Beyond short-term disruptions and policy adjustments, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered the structure and direction of international migration flows. Some of these changes may exert lasting effects on future migration patterns.

3.3.1 The Emergence of Return Migration and Reverse Mobility

In terms of international migration scale, the pandemic triggered a noticeable contraction in global population flows. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the global international migrant population stood at approximately 281 million by 2020—about 2 million fewer than the previously projected 283 million (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2020). Following the outbreak, countries implemented stringent health

policies and travel restrictions to address public health risks, which substantially curtailed cross-border mobility and served as a key factor in the decline of international migration numbers.

Beyond quantitative shifts, the pandemic significantly heightened the overall vulnerability of migrant populations. The International Organization for Migration defines “vulnerability” as the limitations migrants face in avoiding, coping with, or recovering from threats such as food shortages, disasters, and violence (IOM, 2019, 2024). During the pandemic, this vulnerability manifested in multiple dimensions, including heightened risk of COVID-19 infection, limited access to healthcare resources, living and working conditions exacerbating health risks, barriers to social integration, and instability in livelihoods and income. Furthermore, xenophobic sentiments and anti-immigrant attitudes have notably risen in some countries amid the pandemic, making migrants more susceptible to discrimination and even violent threats (He et al., 2020). These factors collectively eroded migrants' sense of security and stability in their host countries.

Against this backdrop, the phenomena of international migrant return and reverse migration became increasingly prominent during the pandemic.

Typologically, returning migrants generally fall into two categories: first-generation international migrants returning to their birthplaces, and descendants of historically dispersed migrants returning to their ancestral homelands known as counter-diasporic migration (King & Christou, 2011). However, this classification remains somewhat broad in the pandemic context. For instance, whether returnees retain citizenship of their former country of residence or hold refugee or other political statuses affects the responsibilities and obligations borne by the receiving government, leading to differentiated policy responses. Consequently, academia has

increasingly studied “forced return migration” as a distinct category in recent years.

Theoretically, traditional push-pull migration theories emphasize the dominant role of economic factors in return decisions—adverse economic conditions in the host country acting as a push, while potential economic improvement in the country of origin forming a pull. However, migration returns during the pandemic demonstrate that economic factors alone can no longer fully explain contemporary return phenomena. Social relationships, family factors, and political environments play increasingly significant roles in return migration decisions. Research indicates that non-economic factors, such as family reunification, lifestyle choices, and policy changes, can even surpass economic considerations in certain contexts, becoming key drivers of return migration (Czaika & de Haas, 2013; Cassarino, 2020).

Due to restricted economic activity and rising unemployment in destination countries, particularly in the service sector and informal employment, a large number of temporary migrants and short-term residents have chosen or been forced to return to their countries of origin. This trend is especially pronounced among migrant groups with inadequate labor protections and significant exclusion from social security systems. While this return migration has alleviated some employment and social pressures in destination countries, it has simultaneously created new challenges for countries of origin—including job shortages, strained public services, and reduced remittances. The pandemic has thus triggered a chain reaction of population mobility shifts across nations.

This return trend is especially pronounced in developed economies. During the pandemic, many advanced economies entered recessions marked by shrinking job opportunities and tightened social welfare, prompting some migrants to return to their countries of origin (OECD, 2020). Represe

nted by the United Kingdom, developed nations implemented systematic post-pandemic immigration policy tightening. To address post-pandemic socioeconomic pressures and domestic political demands, the UK government significantly raised immigration thresholds. Minimum salary requirements for skilled worker visas surged to £38,700 (Government of the United Kingdom, 2024), workers in critical sectors like healthcare faced restrictions on bringing family members, while visa fees and immigration health surcharges underwent multiple increases. The cumulative impact of these policies rapidly altered the cost-benefit calculations for immigrants residing in the UK. As illustrated in Figure 3.2, data from the UK Office for National Statistics (2025) show that UK net migration fell sharply after its post-pandemic peak, declining by around 80% to approximately 204,000 in the year ending June 2025. Notably, Indian nationals formed the largest departing group, including numerous international students who struggled to meet new salary thresholds (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2025). This outflow represents a mobility adjustment by immigrant groups constrained by adverse changes in the host country's institutional environment (IOM, 2024).

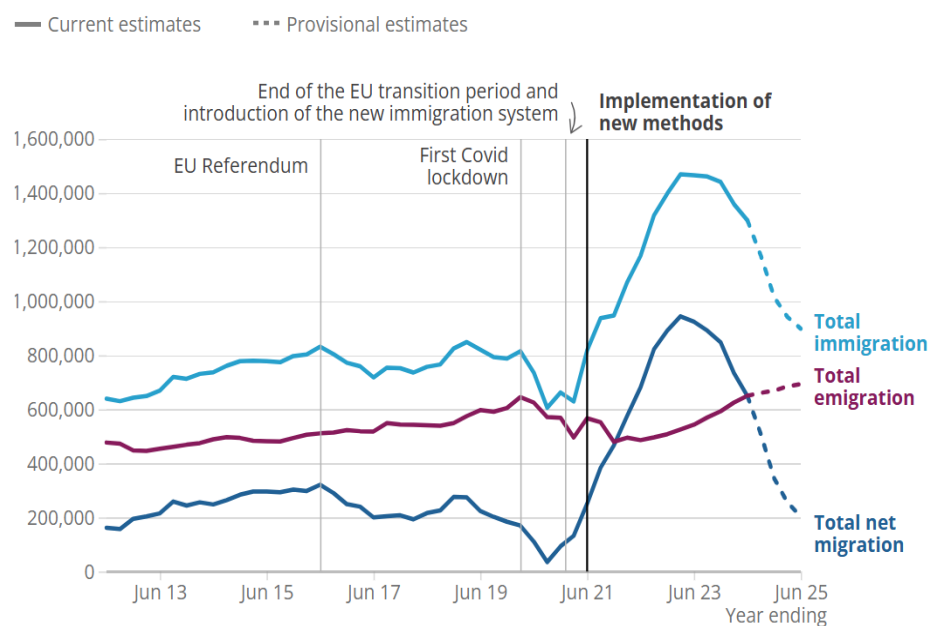


Figure 3.2 Immigration, emigration and net migration in the United Kingdom, 2012–2025

Source: UK Office for National Statistics (2025). Based on data from the Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, and the International Passenger Survey.

Meanwhile, another wave of voluntary return driven by security concerns and quality-of-life considerations is unfolding simultaneously. The choices of Chinese students studying abroad are particularly indicative: over half of returning students cited “more effective domestic pandemic control” as the most significant factor, while the convenience of life in China, faster economic recovery, and greater employment opportunities collectively formed a compelling pull factor (Center for China and Globalization [CCG], 2021).

Among traditional emigration countries, New Zealand presents a particularly illustrative case. A survey by the Kiwis Abroad Association (KEA) revealed that nearly half of overseas New Zealanders plan to return home, with over half explicitly citing the COVID-19 pandemic as a key factor prompting or accelerating their repatriation plans (Kea New Zealand, 2021). Combined with Statistics New Zealand (2023) estimates of the overseas New Zealand population, this trend suggests a potential return migration scale reaching hundreds of thousands. Notably, many of these prospective returnees have resided overseas for over a decade and hold key positions in critical industries, reflecting the pandemic's profound impact on the long-term migration pathways of mid-to-high-skilled immigrants.

In Hong Kong, following a phase of population outflow dominated by security concerns in 2022, the city recorded significant net population inflow in 2023. This recovery, driven by the normalization of social operations and targeted policies like the High-End Talent Pass Scheme (Census and

d Statistics Department of Hong Kong, 2024) , included a substantial “reverse migration” of young adults and highly educated professionals. This clearly demonstrates that return migration is not a one-way or final destination but a dynamic process that may recur as objective conditions and subjective expectations evolve. While the pandemic may initially drive “risk-averse outflows,” it can later induce opportunity-driven returns (IOM, 2024) as policies and prospects become clearer.

A synthesis of experiences across different countries and regions reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly amplified both the probability and scale of return migration. Factors such as public health security, tightened immigration policies, shifts in employment opportunities, and family and social ties have converged under pandemic conditions, compelling migrants to engage in more complex deliberations about whether to remain in their destination countries. The pandemic has thus not only amplified existing return motives but also introduced new dimensions to migration decision-making, propelling international population flows from a state of high expansion toward a more cautious and unstable phase.

3.3.2 The Widening Gap in Global Mobility Inequality

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated inequalities in global population mobility.

Understanding the pandemic's impact on international migration hinges not on short-term shifts in migration volumes, but on how migration policies and mobility regimes were reactivated during the crisis, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities (Geddes, 2021). As previously demonstrated, migration is not solely determined by individual choice but is profoundly shaped by policy frameworks such as visa systems, border controls, and regional mobility agreements. Under the global shock of the pandemic, th

e role of these policy instruments has been significantly amplified, further widening pre-existing mobility disparities.

The formulation and implementation of migration policies primarily occur at the national level, profoundly influenced by international political relations and the global governance landscape. As a core means for states to exercise “extraterritorial control” over population movements, visa systems directly determine who is permitted to enter a country's territory, the duration of their stay, and the rights they enjoy. During the pandemic, nations widely adopted temporary measures to curb virus transmission, including suspending visa services, tightening entry requirements, imposing travel bans, and enforcing mandatory quarantine.

Data from the International Organization for Migration and United Nations reports indicates that nearly all countries worldwide implemented some form of cross-border travel restrictions in 2020 (IOM, 2020). At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, global international air passenger traffic declined by more than 60% year on year, as reflected in the sharp collapse of international RPKs (ICAO, 2021). However, these seemingly “equal” public health measures produced differentiated impacts in practice. Citizens from countries with high Human Development Index (HDI) rankings benefited from stable regional agreements and recovered more quickly (Czajka & de Haas, 2013; OECD, 2025). In contrast, citizens from low- and middle-income countries—whose passports already offer limited visa-free access faced heightened risks during the pandemic (Mau et al., 2015; IOM, 2024). Visa application channels closed, processing times were indefinitely delayed, and applications were frequently rejected outright, systematically excluding them from legal mobility frameworks. For instance, while the series of presidential proclamations issued by the United States in 2020 restricted entry for immigrants and nonimmigrants from certain countries, processing for specific categories—such as the H-1B visa for high

hly skilled workers—was prioritized, highlighting the selective and unequal nature of the policy(USCIS, 2020).

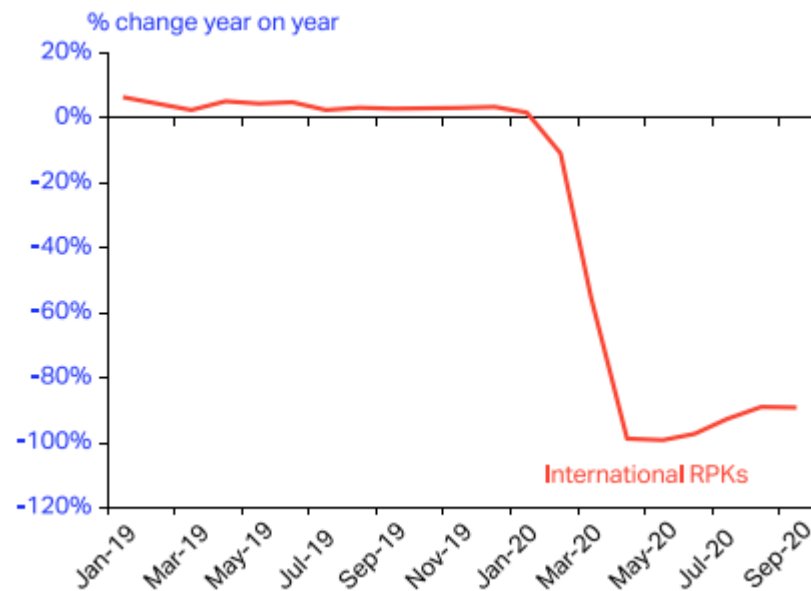


Figure 3.3 Year-on-year change in global international air passenger traffic (International RPKs), 2019–2020

Source: International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), 2021.

Regional mobility agreements underwent rigorous stress tests during the pandemic, with their varying performances revealing how institutional foundations shape mobility rights. In the EU, despite initial border closures by member states during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak that raised questions about the Schengen system, the European Commission swiftly issued the “Guidelines on Ensuring the Free Movement of Cross-Border Workers.” Through coordinated mechanisms like the “EU Digital COVID Certificate,” internal free movement was gradually restored by summer 2021 (European Commission, 2021). Fundamentally, the political consensus, legal framework, and institutional capacity underpinning the Schengen system endowed it with robust resilience, safeguarding the core mobility rights of EU citizens.

In contrast, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established the principle of free movement of persons as early as 1979 in its Free Movement Protocol, yet implementation remained weak. During the pandemic, member states like Nigeria and Ghana unilaterally tightened border controls for public health and security reasons, even closing land borders for months. This brought the already challenging principle of free movement to a virtual standstill in practice. According to an African Development Bank report, the pandemic severely disrupted labor migration within West Africa that relies on seasonal movement, exacerbating livelihood difficulties in border communities (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2020). This stark contrast demonstrates that the degree of regional integration and the strength of institutional enforcement capacity directly determine whether populations in different regions can maintain basic mobility rights during crises, thereby widening the structural gap in mobility opportunities between the global North and South.

From a longer-term perspective, the pandemic has not reversed but rather entrenched the unequal patterns of global population mobility. Data from the UN DESA (2020) shows that between 1995 and 2020, while the absolute number of international migrants from countries with low to medium Human Development Index (HDI) increased, their share in the global migrant stock grew only slowly. Conversely, the scale and proportion of out-migrants from countries with high and very high HDI rose significantly, creating a phenomenon known as the “polarization” of mobility. The pandemic has further entrenched this trend by reinforcing visa barriers and tightening quotas for family reunification and work migration. Groups possessing high skills, substantial capital, or “high-value” passports are better equipped to adapt to policy changes—even leveraging investment migration channels like “golden visas” to maintain

mobility. Meanwhile, low-skilled workers, family reunification seekers, and refugees face heightened institutional barriers.

This stringent and highly selective policy environment may also generate a “crowding-out effect.” When conventional, safe migration pathways are blocked, some potential migrants driven by economic, security, or family reasons may turn to irregular, high-risk routes. The International Organization for Migration reports that human smuggling and trafficking activities along key migration routes in the Mediterranean and the Americas did not decrease during the pandemic; instead, migrants' vulnerability during their journeys and their risk of exploitation increased (IOM, 2024). In contrast, regions with robust bilateral labor agreements or regional protection frameworks—such as the seasonal agricultural worker program between Canada and certain Caribbean nations, which continued with adjustments—were better positioned to maintain some regular mobility while safeguarding public health, thereby reducing overall risks for migrants.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic did not simply suppress global population mobility. Instead, it reinforced national border sovereignty, tightened visa access, and highlighted regional institutional disparities, further concentrating international migration toward highly developed countries and specific groups. In the short term, the pandemic amplified the exclusionary nature of immigration policies, while in the long term, it exacerbated structural inequalities between nations and populations regarding the fundamental question of “mobility access.” This shift not only reshaped migration patterns during the pandemic but also carries profound implications for global migration governance in the post-pandemic era.

Chapter 4: Migrant Vulnerabilities and Social Inequalities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Against the backdrop of global population mobility disruptions and immigration policy adjustments triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant communities faced multiple shocks across economic, social, and daily life dimensions. Due to their unstable immigration status, concentrated employment patterns, and limited access to social security, migrants were often more vulnerable to risks than local residents during the pandemic (Fasani & Mazza, 2020; Guadagno, 2020). This chapter examines migrants' specific experiences during the pandemic through three dimensions—economic and employment challenges, social integration and mental health, and digital life and transnational connections—to reveal the tangible consequences of macro-level policy changes at the individual level (Anthias, 2021).

4.1 Economic and Employment Impacts

4.1.1 Reduced Employment Opportunities and Industry Disruptions

When discussing the economic and employment effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, comparisons are often drawn with the 2008 global financial crisis or the Great Depression of the twentieth century. However, the pandemic shock differs fundamentally from financial crises in both origin and transmission mechanism. Financial crises typically emerge from prolonged structural imbalances and the collapse of asset bubbles, producing cyclical downturns through financial markets and demand contraction.

By contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as an acute exogenous shock: a sudden, high-intensity disruption originating outside the economic system that simultaneously affects production, consumption, and labor mobility. In this sense, the pandemic qualifies as a “black swan” event, defined here as an unexpected and low-probability shock with

severe systemic consequences (Taleb, 2007). Unlike typical financial shocks, the pandemic directly constrained the physical movement of labor through lockdowns, travel restrictions, and border closures (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

The drastic upheaval in industrial structure during the pandemic has directly compressed livelihood opportunities for large segments of the population. Migrants and mobile workers are highly concentrated in the service sector, tourism, catering, and labor-intensive manufacturing—industries that experienced the most extensive shutdowns during the pandemic and have shown relatively slow recovery.

Taking China as an example, the sectoral impact of the pandemic was highly uneven. According to the KPMG (2020), as shown in Figure 4.1, industrial output contracted sharply across most sectors in the first quarter of 2020, while a limited number of knowledge-intensive industries experienced resilience or even growth. The information transmission, software, and IT services sector recorded GDP growth of 13.2 percent, whereas sectors employing large numbers of migrant workers suffered pronounced declines. Catering, wholesale and retail, transportation, and leasing and business services contracted by 35.3 percent, 17.8 percent, 14 percent, and 9.4 percent respectively compared with the same period of the previous year.

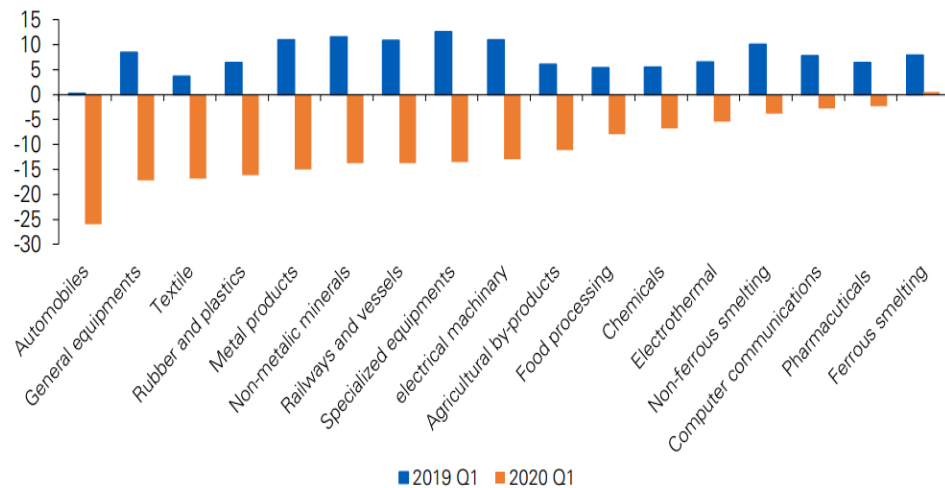


Figure 4.1 Growth rate of value added in major sectors, cumulative YOY, %

Source: KPMG China Economic Monitor (Q2 2020), based on Wind data

Unlike the demand-driven contraction observed during financial crises, the pandemic directly triggered widespread store closures and factory shutdowns, disrupting supply chains and sharply reducing labor demand. Taking Shanghai as an example, trade data from Shanghai Customs (2020) show that total exports in January–February 2020 declined by 12.1 percent year on year, with exports to Japan, the United States, and the European Union falling by 31.1 percent, 10.8 percent, and 10.6 percent respectively compared with the same period of the previous year (see Table 4.2). Cancellations and delays in foreign trade orders forced firms to scale back production. Under pressures from rising inventories and mounting costs, enterprises adopted wage reduction and workforce adjustment measures. Migrant workers—often engaged in informal employment, temporary contracts, or casual labor—were disproportionately affected due to limited access to social security and formal labor protections. This sector-level asymmetry precipitated a structural employment crisis for marginalized migrant workers, marked by a sharp decline in job opportunities.

Total Import and Export Value		
2020/2/1		
Indicator Name	January–February (RMB billion)	Increase over the same period last year (%)
Total Import and Export Value of Shanghai Customs District	8556.99	-8.6
Total imports	3759.31	-3.8
Total exports	4797.68	-12.1
By Export Market		
Japan	161.90	-31.1
United States	374.59	-10.8
European Union	281.21	-10.6
Key Indicator Explanations		
Total Import and Export Value of Shanghai Customs District: Refers to trade data declared for import and export at Shanghai Customs.		

Figure 4.2 Changes in Import and Export Values in Shanghai (Jan–Feb 2020)

Source: Shanghai Customs trade statistics (2020/2/1).

The pandemic-induced decline in market activity, combined with physical distancing measures, also disrupted migrants access to employment opportunities. From the perspective of labor market search-and-matching theory, widespread lockdowns and business closures reduced firms' incentives to post vacancies, shifting labor demand leftward and sharply lowering the probability of successful job matching (Mortensen & Pissarides, 1994; Diamond, 1982). At the same time, mobility restrictions constrained job search across regions, further weakening matching efficiency.

Border closures, port restrictions, and city lockdowns therefore not only delayed migrants' return to work but also generated pronounced spatial mismatches between labor demand and labor supply.

April and May mark the harvest season in Western Europe. In 2020, however, many countries experienced severe shortages of seasonal foreign agricultural workers, leaving large quantities of produce unharvested. Estimates suggest that Italy faced a shortage of up to one million agricultural workers, France required approximately 200,000, while Germany and the United Kingdom each needed around 400,000 seasonal workers (Fasani & Mazza, 2020; OECD, 2020). Due to border controls and travel restrictions, many cross-border workers were unable to reach their workplaces on time, facing the paradox of “jobs available but unable to return.”

This situation exemplifies how pandemic-related mobility restrictions transformed labor shortages into binding constraints, despite continued demand in essential sectors. Meanwhile, urban lockdowns left many migrant workers in a state of hidden unemployment—formally employed but unable to resume work.

Beyond sector-specific disruptions, the global economic shutdown and supply chain shocks further intensified the labor market crisis. Estimates indicate that during the early stages of the pandemic, global job creation declined by approximately 11.7 percent. Employment shocks were particularly severe in major economies: the U.S. unemployment rate rose from 4 percent in January 2020 to 14.4 percent in April (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020), while Canada's unemployment rate increased from 5.8 percent to 13.7 percent over the same period (Statistics Canada, 2020).

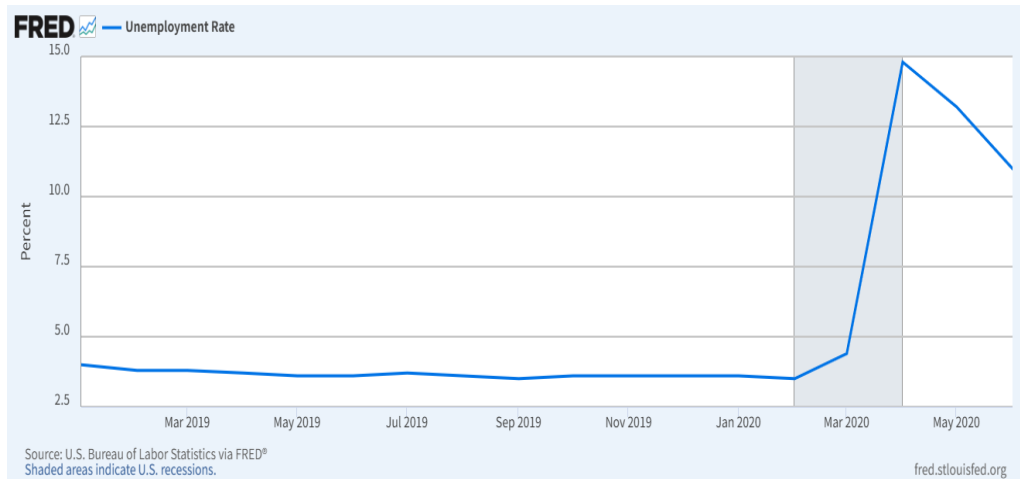


Figure 4.3 Unemployment Rate in the United States Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2019–2020)

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed via FRED (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis)

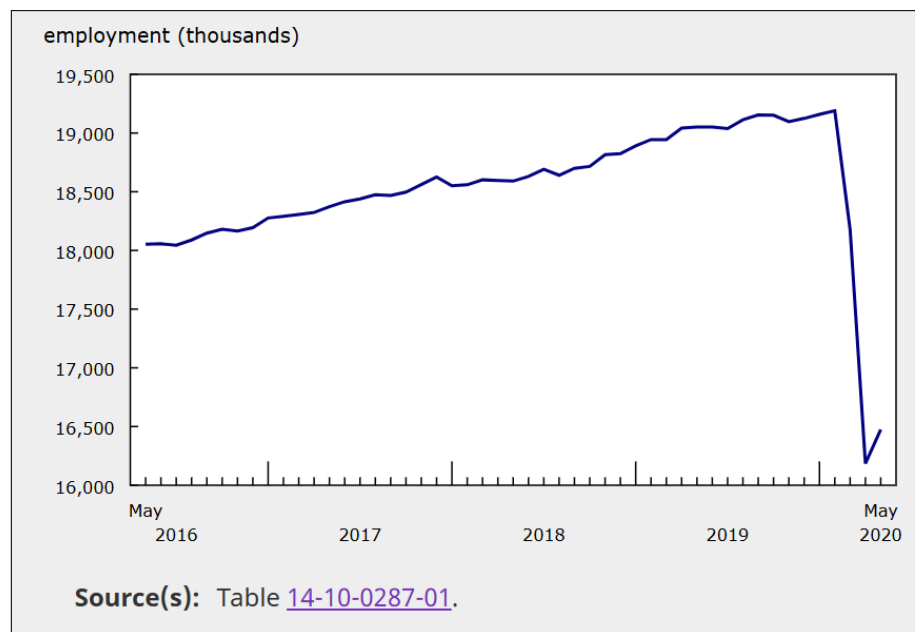


Figure 4.4 Employment Level in Canada Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2016–2020)

Source: Statistics Canada (2020), Labour Force Survey, Daily release, 5 June 2020

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that global working hours in 2020 declined by nearly 9 percent compared to the fourth quarter of 2019, equivalent to a loss of approximately 255 million full-time jobs (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). This measure, based on hours worked rather than headcount unemployment, indicates that the employment impact of the pandemic was several times greater than that of the 2008 global financial crisis. In this context, migrant workers—already disadvantaged by precarious employment, limited welfare access, and weak labor protections—experienced job losses and income reductions earlier and more intensely than local workers (Fasani & Mazza, 2020; IOM, 2024).

Overall, border closures and restrictions on cross-border mobility severed employment pathways for many migrants. By simultaneously constraining labor supply and suppressing labor demand, the pandemic exerted a persistent and profound negative impact on migrant employment, amplifying pre-existing inequalities in labor market outcomes.

4.1.2 Identity, Welfare, and Economic Vulnerability

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic vulnerability of immigrant populations was manifested not only in shrinking employment opportunities and interrupted income streams, but also in the structural disconnect between legal status and access to social welfare systems. In this chapter, identity refers to migrants legally and administratively defined status categories, such as nationality, visa type, and residency status, which determine access to rights and public resources.

In most countries, social security systems require citizenship or stable, long-term legal residency as core eligibility criteria, leaving immigrants particularly those with temporary, low-skilled, or undocumented status marginalized within these frameworks. While this institutional design already produces inequality under normal conditions, its exclusionary

effects were significantly amplified by the sudden and systemic shock of the pandemic (Fasani & Mazza, 2020).

The International Labour Organization estimates indicate a substantial global reduction in working hours in 2020, with migrant workers bearing a disproportionate share of the employment impact. Migrants are highly concentrated in sectors most severely affected by lockdown measures—such as services, construction, agriculture, domestic work, and tourism—where employment stability is inherently lower than that of citizens.

At the peak of the pandemic, the unemployment rate among foreign-born workers in the United States reached 12.5 percent, compared to 7.9 percent among native-born workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2021). In several EU member states, migrant workers similarly faced systematically higher unemployment risks (OECD, 2020). However, in sharp contrast to the economic shocks they experienced, migrants' access to public income support and social protection remained markedly limited.

At the institutional level, unemployment benefits, health insurance, and emergency income support are often tied to nationality or long-term residency status. A comparative study by the European Union shows that over half of member states excluded temporary or undocumented immigrants from core income support mechanisms (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2021).

This exclusion reflects an identity-based institutional logic, understood here as a governance framework in which social rights and benefits are allocated according to formal membership status rather than actual residence, need, or contribution. In crisis situations, this logic pushes migrants into a protection vacuum (Guadagno, 2020), leaving them without basic buffers when their income collapses.

For migrants without formal status or with unstable residency, the pandemic generated a double crisis. On the one hand, lockdowns and social distancing measures severely disrupted the informal economic activities upon which they depend for survival. World Bank data indicate that employment in the informal sector declined by approximately 20 percent globally in 2020, with migrants comprising a disproportionately large share of this workforce (World Bank, 2021).

On the other hand, the lack of legal status rendered many undocumented migrants effectively “invisible” during the crisis. Fear of detention, deportation, or jeopardizing future residency prospects discouraged contact with government agencies, reinforcing exclusion from both economic support and public health services.

The International Organization for Migration found in its multi-country survey that over half of undocumented migrants avoid seeking COVID-19 testing, medical care, or government assistance due to fear of enforcement consequences (IOM, 2020). This avoidance behavior should not be interpreted as individual choice but as a rational response to institutional exclusion.

Consequently, undocumented migrants are denied economic support while struggling to access timely public health information and medical resources. Their economic insecurity and health insecurity reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle of worsening conditions.

The intertwining of economic and health risks exposes migrants to more complex and profound vulnerabilities during the pandemic. On one hand, lacking social safety nets, many migrants are forced to continue working even when symptomatic to sustain minimal livelihoods. Research by the OECD (2020) indicates that infection rates among migrant workers in “essential sectors” such as agriculture, food processing, caregiving, warehousing, and logistics significantly exceed societal averages. On the

other hand, immigrants commonly reside in crowded, substandard housing conditions, further increasing the risk of cluster infections (Fasani & Mazza, 2020). This demonstrates that identity-based welfare barriers not only exacerbate immigrants' own vulnerability but also objectively undermine the effectiveness of overall public health governance.

It is noteworthy that different regions and countries have adopted differentiated approaches in addressing this issue. In East Asia and the Pacific, some nations have mitigated the pandemic's short-term impact on vulnerable groups by expanding existing social safety nets and social assistance programs. For instance, Indonesia and the Philippines broadened the coverage of key social assistance programs and temporarily increased benefit levels (World Bank, 2021). In the formal employment sector, multiple countries maintained job stability through measures such as waiving or deferring social insurance contributions and implementing wage subsidies. However, these measures largely rely on existing identity registration and administrative systems, with coverage still primarily focused on citizens and formal workers. Migrants, particularly informal migrants, have benefited only marginally.

In developing countries with limited fiscal capacity, this issue is even more pronounced. Governments face a difficult trade-off between protecting lives and protecting livelihoods (World Bank, 2022), while the lack of institutional capacity to expand social assistance coverage makes migrants more vulnerable to exclusion from policies. The World Bank and other international organizations therefore emphasize that expanding the accessibility of social assistance through digital payments, mobile finance, and other means, while relaxing strict identity requirements during crises, is crucial for preventing the spillover of social risks (ILO, 2021).

Overall, the pandemic functions as a prism that reveals how identity-based institutional arrangements within welfare systems amplify inequality

under crisis conditions (Guadagno, 2020). The disproportionate risks borne by migrant populations are not accidental but reflect long-standing structural exclusion intensified by sudden shocks. This experience underscores the importance of more inclusive and flexible emergency social protection mechanisms in enhancing societal resilience and the effectiveness of public governance.

4.2 Social Integration and Mental Health

4.2.1 Stigmatization and Social Exclusion During the Pandemic

Beyond economic impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic also significantly undermined immigrants' social integration by intensifying processes of stigmatization and social exclusion. In this chapter, *stigmatization* refers to the social construction of certain groups as carriers of risk or threat, leading to discriminatory attitudes, exclusionary practices, and weakened social cohesion. During health crises, such stigmatization is frequently linked to geographic origin, ethnicity, or nationality, transforming public fear into social boundary-making.

Historical experience shows that epidemics are often accompanied by geographic stigmatization. The 1918 influenza pandemic, commonly referred to as the “Spanish Flu,” did not originate in Spain, yet early media reporting created a lasting association between the country and the disease (Spinney, 2017). Similar controversies emerged during outbreaks of Ebola and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to issue guidelines discouraging the use of geographic references in disease naming in order to prevent stigma and discrimination (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, geographic stigmatization resurfaced in public discourse and media representation. Terms such as “China virus” and “Chinese virus” circulated widely in the early stages of the outbreak,

while visual imagery featuring face masks, national flags, and racialized symbols reinforced narratives that associated the virus with specific populations. These representations contributed to the construction of Asian and Asian-descended communities as outsiders (He et al., 2020), intensifying social exclusion and discrimination.

As a consequence, immigrants—particularly those of Asian origin—experienced heightened levels of hostility in everyday life, including verbal harassment, social avoidance, and physical violence. This stigmatization not only undermined social integration but also generated significant psychological stress and fear among affected communities.

A prominent example occurred in France, where *Le Courrier Picard* ran the headline “Yellow Alert (Alerte Jaune)” and titled its report “The Yellow Peril? (Le péril jaune?)” (BBC News, 2020). This discriminatory term, originally coined by Western racists in the 19th century, carries deep-seated racist connotations linked to colonial history (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). In the International Migration Outlook 2025 (OECD, 2025), the long-term impact of this “pandemic-driven xenophobia” has created a “social scarring effect,” where affected migrant groups in Europe and North America report significantly lower levels of institutional trust and social belonging even in the 2024-2025 post-pandemic period.



Figure 4.5 “Alerte Jaune” and the racialized media framing of COVID-19 in France

Source: Le Courrier Picard, reproduced and discussed in BBC News (2020)

Mainstream media frequently employed visual imagery incorporating elements such as face masks, the Chinese flag, and the color red, implicitly constructing a symbolic association between the pandemic and China. These representations reinforced a foreign origin narrative in public perceptions of COVID-19, implicitly attributing responsibility for the spread of the virus to a specific nation. Such media framing contributed to the amplification of negative sentiments toward China and facilitated processes of “otherization,” which in turn deepened social boundaries between immigrant communities and mainstream society (Said, 1978; Tazzioli, 2020).

Because the COVID-19 pandemic first erupted in China, Asian have faced a surge in racial discrimination. They are perceived as carriers of the virus, subjected to ridicule, exclusion, and isolation in public spaces. This discrimination has escalated from subtle expressions of contempt to physical assaults, with even Asian children falling victim to attacks. Asian communities faced the dual burden of racial discrimination and virus-related fear in daily life, experiencing intense negative emotions such as confusion, frustration, exhaustion, and most significantly, fear: fear of the unknown, fear of uncertainty, and fear that the virus might threaten themselves and their families.

In mid-March 2020, Asian human rights organizations partnered with San Francisco State University to establish the STOPAAPI HATE Data Center to track and analyze cases of racial discrimination triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within just six weeks, the center received 1,710 reports from across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020). Beyond the most common form of verbal harassment, many cases involved serious violent incidents requiring police intervention. This investigation clearly demonstrates that the pandemic-induced stigmatization of specific regions has significantly intensified racial discrimination against Asian communities in Western societies.

In everyday life, such stigmatization manifests in unequal treatment in employment, housing, and public spaces, reinforcing feelings of isolation and insecurity among immigrant populations. Under pandemic conditions, fear and uncertainty intensified tendencies to attribute risk to “outsiders,” further eroding the fragile foundations of social integration. These dynamics demonstrate that social exclusion during the pandemic was not incidental, but structurally produced through the interaction of public fear, media discourse, and existing social boundaries.

4.2.2 Psychological Stress, Isolation, and Limited Support Networks

The COVID-19 pandemic has further affected the mental health of immigrant communities, particularly international students. During the pandemic, many international students found themselves in increasingly isolated social positions within their host societies. Constraints related to financial resources, access to information, language barriers, and cultural differences limited their ability to obtain public resources and social support (Guadagno, 2020).

At the same time, drastic reductions in international flights, city lockdowns, tightened visa policies, and university closures or shifts to online teaching placed many students in prolonged states of housing instability and uncertainty regarding future plans. Even those eligible to return home often faced a dilemma, hesitating due to fears of infection during travel or of transmitting the virus to family members.

Relevant survey data clearly reflects the widespread nature and severity of this psychological impact. The Mental Health White Paper for Chinese Students in North America (2020), jointly released by the China-US Youth Summit and BeenThere, reveals that among Chinese students studying abroad, nearly half experience moderate psychological stress, while approximately one-quarter endure significant psychological pressure. Overall, this group's average anxiety level falls within the moderate range, while their average depression level also reaches moderate severity. Among the 1,222 Chinese students surveyed, approximately 60% reported extremely poor mental states (China-US Youth Summit & BeenThere, 2020), frequently experiencing intense anxiety and persistent psychological pressure. Concurrently, about 20% explicitly stated difficulty accessing professional mental health services. These findings indicate that anxiety and depression were widespread among international students during the pandemic, while access to professional psychological services and informal support networks in host countries remained limited.

The intensification of psychological distress among international students is closely linked to their prolonged separation from home and solitary life and study abroad. Immersed in unfamiliar cultural environments and lacking stable social networks, these students are more prone to intense homesickness and loneliness. Existing research consistently shows that loneliness is a strong predictor of adverse mental health outcomes. A longitudinal study of 454 UK undergraduate students revealed that loneliness remains a significant predictor of multiple indicators, including anxiety, depression, stress, and overall mental health even after controlling for demographic variables and baseline psychological levels (Groarke et al., 2020). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, international students widely adhered to social distancing policies, attending classes from home and reducing outings. The significant decrease in in-person social activities, coupled with physical isolation and lack of social interaction, further intensified psychological loneliness, posing a persistent threat to their mental health.

Similar psychological pressures extend beyond the international student community. For recent immigrants, those living alone, or immigrants with limited social connections, prolonged isolation and reduced social interaction have similarly intensified feelings of isolation. Language barriers, inadequate access to information, and insufficient understanding of policies have made it difficult for some immigrants to promptly grasp epidemic prevention measures, medical information, and social support resources, thereby amplifying their feelings of unease and anxiety.

Beyond isolation and limited resources, discrimination and stigmatization have also significantly affected immigrants' mental health during the pandemic. In the early stages of COVID-19, Asian and Asian-American communities experienced heightened levels of discrimination in multiple countries, often being perceived as carriers or sources of the virus.

Reports by UNESCO-affiliated research groups in Italy, Spain, Greece, Denmark, and the Netherlands document a range of discriminatory practices, including verbal harassment in public spaces, stigmatizing discourse on social media, commercial boycotts, and, in some cases, barriers to equal access to education (Laniado et al., 2021).

As the pandemic progressed, discriminatory practices did not disappear but instead shifted targets and forms. Research conducted at the Autonomous University of Madrid documents how Romani communities in northern Spain became focal points of exclusion after being identified as early infection clusters (Beltrán-Peneñuri et al., 2021). Similar dynamics were observed elsewhere, as fear of infection generated new forms of stigmatization targeting healthcare workers, supermarket employees, and homeless populations (Taylor, 2019; IOM, 2024).

In the realm of labor migration, the intensified “security-oriented” logic during the pandemic further exacerbated psychological burdens on migrants. Although the vital role of migrant workers in sustaining host economies received some recognition during the crisis, the convergence of health and economic crises triggered a resurgence of securitized narratives targeting migrants (Bourbeau, 2011). On one hand, some countries implemented discriminatory quarantine, inspection, and surveillance measures against migrant workers during pandemic response efforts. Health screenings, though routine procedures in transnational labor flows, are frequently used in practice as tools for screening and controlling migrants, leaving migrant workers perpetually anxious about unemployment and deportation (Tazzioli, 2021).

On the other hand, due to relatively weak healthcare conditions in migrant-sending countries and the generally poor working and living environments of migrant workers, receiving societies often develop stereotypical perceptions of migrants as “high-risk groups for health.” This perception

has been amplified during the pandemic. Some receiving governments have conducted surprise inspections of migrant workplaces and living quarters under the pretext of public health (Fasani et al., 2021), while employers have suppressed migrant workers' rights claims by controlling their health certificates. Against the backdrop of this pandemic, “fear of the other” has driven a shift in migration discourse, stigmatizing specific migrant groups and their transnational movements as threats to the health and safety of domestic populations. These dynamics illustrate how securitized health governance during the pandemic translated into persistent psychological stress for migrant workers, extending beyond material insecurity.

Taking Kuwait as an example, a 2020 public opinion survey conducted by Kuwait University on the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that among 1,002 respondents, 65% believed foreign workers were the primary cause of the virus's spread. Furthermore, 76.2% advocated for the repatriation of foreign laborers (Al-Fadhli & Al-Daihani, 2020), while 39.4% argued that public hospitals should not provide free COVID-19 treatment to foreigners. Such attitudes obscure the fact that the heightened health risks faced by migrant workers stem not from migration status itself, but from structural vulnerabilities embedded in working and living conditions (Kaur, 2022).

Taken together, these dynamics confirm a recurring social pattern: during periods of crisis and heightened uncertainty, fear and anxiety are frequently projected onto socially marginalized groups (Czaika et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic not only intensified migrants' psychological stress and isolation but also restricted their access to social support through discrimination, stigmatization, and securitized policy responses. As a result, immigrant communities have borne disproportionate psychological and social costs during the pandemic.

4.3 Digital Life and Remote Connectivity

4.3.1 Impact of Digital Technology on Migrant Lifestyles

Amid restricted mobility, digital technology has significantly increased in importance for migrants. Remote work, online education, and digital platforms have provided alternative means for some migrants to maintain employment and studies, particularly for highly skilled migrants and those in knowledge-intensive roles. Digital transformation has mitigated the pandemic's impact for these groups (Helsper, 2021).

However, this impact is uneven. Low-skilled immigrants and manual laborers often lack the conditions for remote work and are more susceptible to constraints from the digital divide, such as insufficient devices, limited internet access, or inadequate digital skills. While digital technology alleviates some challenges for immigrants, it may also exacerbate inequalities within immigrant communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only reshaped migrants' spatial mobility through border controls and social distancing, but has also driven a deeper transformation toward digitalization and remote engagement in their daily lives. At the level of social relations, digital communication technologies became vital links for migrants to maintain transnational connections during the pandemic (Pries, 2021). With international travel disrupted and returning home difficult, many migrants found themselves physically separated from family members for extended periods. Video calls, instant messaging apps, and social media platforms thus took on the functions of emotional support and social connection. Through digital means, migrants could to some extent alleviate the isolation and uncertainty brought by spatial separation. However, this “remote intimacy” (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020) also has clear limitations. On one hand, digital communication cannot fully replace face-to-face interaction, and prolonged reliance on online communication may intensify emotional fatigue. On the other hand, disparities in digital technology accessibility and proficiency across

generations and regions have paradoxically made connections within some immigrant families more fragile.

In the realms of education and career development, remote technologies have profoundly transformed how immigrants learn and work. During the pandemic, higher education institutions and training organizations in many countries swiftly transitioned to online instruction, compelling international students to relocate their academic activities to virtual spaces. This shift has partially mitigated geographical constraints on educational participation, enabling some students to continue their studies even while residing in their home countries or third nations. However, online learning has also exposed significant inequalities. Insufficient language support, diminished instructional interaction, time zone challenges, and constrained learning environments have adversely affected the educational experience and academic performance of many international students. Concurrently (Arar & Sterian, 2021), institutional tensions between visa status and online learning have gradually surfaced. Some countries continue to require in-person attendance to maintain the validity of student visas, intensifying insecurity among international students (UNESCO, 2021).

In the labor sphere, the rise of remote work has opened new possibilities for highly skilled migrants (IOM, 2024). Multinational corporations and knowledge-intensive industries accelerated digital transformation during the pandemic, loosening the link between work location and residence. Some migrants can now participate in the international labor market without physical cross-border movement, even choosing to reside in their home countries or low-cost regions. This trend has partially reduced reliance on physical migration within traditional immigration pathways. However, the beneficiaries of this “digital mobility” are primarily concentrated among highly skilled, highly educated immigrant groups.

Immigrants engaged in manual labor, service industries, and informal employment struggle to integrate into remote work systems, with digital technology instead reinforcing structural divisions between different types of immigrants.

In terms of information access and public services, digital governance played a dual role during the pandemic. On one hand, many countries released epidemic prevention policies, health information, and social assistance measures through online platforms, providing immigrants with vital information channels. Some nations also promoted digital application systems, enabling immigrants to handle matters like residence permit extensions, visa renewals, or health declarations online, thereby enhancing administrative efficiency. On the other hand, digital governance also placed higher demands on immigrants' language proficiency, technological literacy, and access to devices. For immigrants lacking stable internet connections, digital devices, or sufficient proficiency in the official language, digitalization instead created a new mechanism of exclusion, making it harder for them to access timely and effective public services.

The widespread adoption of digital technologies has also reshaped immigrants' understanding of presence and belonging. Supported by remote communication and online participation, immigrants can simultaneously maintain relational networks across multiple social spaces, forming a state of trans-territorial simultaneity (Vertovec, 2023). This state both diminishes the traditional immigrant experience centered on physical settlement and blurs the boundaries between the host country and the country of origin. However, this de-spatialized lifestyle has not eliminated the institutional constraints immigrants face. Visa policies, social welfare eligibility, and labor rights remain grounded in physical residence and

legal status, rendering digital connectivity more of a supplementary resource than a substitute solution (Tazzioli, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the embedding of digital technologies in immigrant lives, making remote connections a crucial strategy for navigating mobility restrictions. While digitalization has enhanced migrants' adaptability and resilience to some extent, its impact is markedly selective and stratified. Technology does not empower all migrant groups equally; instead, it superimposes new disparities onto existing structures of inequality. The expansion of digital life thus emerges as a crucial dimension for understanding post-pandemic migration experiences, presenting new challenges for future immigration policies in balancing technological governance with social inclusion.

4.3.2 Transnational Family Connections and Emotional Bonds

During the pandemic, restricted transnational mobility prevented many immigrants from returning to their countries of origin to visit relatives or fulfill family responsibilities for extended periods. Against this backdrop, video calls, social media, and digital remittance platforms became vital tools for maintaining transnational family ties. Through digital means, immigrants were able to continue fulfilling roles of economic support and emotional care to a limited extent.

This abrupt disruption of physical co-presence forced transnational families to rely heavily on digital communication infrastructures. Digital media reshaped patterns of family interaction, transforming everyday communication tools into essential mechanisms for sustaining emotional bonds and family responsibilities under conditions of prolonged separation.

Amid pandemic-imposed barriers, digital media first emerged as the “infrastructure” sustaining the basic functioning of transnational families.

The economic responsibility of transnational remittances is fulfilled more frequently and visibly through digital financial platforms. Instant notifications of received funds and the exchange of photos showing family members using the money form a ritual cycle of.” This not only completes the economic task but also symbolically reinforces the migrant's role as the family's provider and their sense of presence, alleviating the anxiety of responsibility that arises from the inability to deliver funds in person. Simultaneously, video call technology creates a virtual co-preconfirmation feedback sense (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020), enabling family members to “infiltrate” each other's daily life scenes—remote dinners, synchronized movie-watching, witnessing children's growth milestones. This practice forms what scholars term “compressed presence,” where digital media condenses trans-temporal intimacy into limited screen frames and time fragments, crafting a highly ritualized, symbolic sense of reunion that anchors family emotional stability. In emergencies, digital media further transforms into a hub for remote coordination and action. Immigrants practice digital filial piety through online medical consultations and remote medication delivery, reconstructing care and devotion when physical presence is impossible (Madianou, 2016). Though merely a functional substitute, this provides tangible support and emotional solace to families in crisis.

However, while digital media builds bridges of connection, it also exposes and exacerbates inherent tensions within transnational family relationships. The more intense the “virtual presence” created by video calls becomes, the more starkly it often highlights the harsh reality of physical absence. This is especially true during significant life rites birthdays, holidays, or when loved ones fall ill or pass away. The faces and words on the screen cannot replace a real embrace or presence. The resulting sense of being “close yet worlds apart” often triggers profound feelings of helplessness,

guilt, and existential grief among immigrants. After these digital reunion “rituals” conclude and screens go dark, physical loneliness often becomes more pronounced, generating cycles of emotional intensification followed by heightened feelings of absence. Moreover, to maintain harmony within long-distance families, immigrants and their loved ones frequently engage in significant “emotional labor” during digital interactions—actively managing and regulating their emotional expressions (Hochschild, 2012; Sun, 2021). Both parties often conceal the pressures, anxieties, and loneliness they experience overseas or back home, instead performing optimism and smooth sailing on camera. This mutual emotional performance, born of protective instincts, preserves superficial calm but consumes immense psychological energy. It may foster a real alienation, where only filtered life snippets are shared, hindering deeper emotional connection. Unspoken pressures and pains quietly “lose their voice” against the backdrop of digital gatherings. Moreover, the effectiveness of transnational connections heavily relies on both parties' digital literacy and equipment availability. Older parents' struggles with complex software, unstable internet signals, and differing generational expectations for communication modes, fragmented instant messages vs. extended ceremonial video calls can all turn the technology itself into a new source of frustration and family friction.

From a theoretical perspective, transnational family connections during the pandemic can be viewed as an extreme stress test under the transnationalism paradigm. Before the pandemic, transnational social spaces relied primarily on the physical flow of people, goods, and money. During the pandemic, this process was forcibly compressed and shifted to digital spaces, achieving a temporary transition from physical transnationalism to digital transnationalism (Vertovec, 2023). This demonstrated both the resilience and adaptability of transnational

connections, while also exposing their deep dependence on physical contact. Simultaneously, not all families benefited equally from digital connectivity. Disparities in digital access and usage capabilities driven by economic conditions, educational backgrounds, and age trapped some families in a double isolation predicament: physically separated by borders and digitally divided by the digital divide, further exacerbating socioeconomic stratification within transnational households.

Overall, transnational family connections during the pandemic exhibited clear double-edged characteristics. Digital technologies functioned as indispensable tools for maintaining economic support and emotional ties, demonstrating the adaptability of transnational families under crisis conditions. At the same time, mediated forms of connection could not substitute for physical co-presence and often intensified emotional strain through sustained emotional labor and compressed interaction. These experiences highlight that migrants' transnational lives remain fundamentally shaped by ongoing negotiations between presence and absence, connection and separation. While digital technologies have altered the modalities of these negotiations, they have not eliminated their underlying tensions.

Chapter 5 : Conclusion

This thesis has examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration and population mobility from a global perspective. By integrating migration theories with empirical analysis, the study has explored how an unprecedented public health crisis disrupted migration patterns, reshaped migration governance, and transformed the everyday experiences of migrant populations. Rather than viewing the pandemic as a temporary interruption to global mobility, the thesis has shown that COVID-19 functioned as a structural shock that exposed and intensified pre-existing inequalities embedded in global migration systems.

At the macro level, the findings demonstrate that the pandemic led to a sharp contraction and reconfiguration of international migration flows. Temporary, circular, and short-term mobility were disproportionately affected, while return migration and reverse mobility became more prominent. These changes were not evenly distributed across regions or migrant groups, revealing deep asymmetries in access to mobility and resilience to crisis. Migration patterns during the pandemic were shaped not only by economic disruptions but also by health risks and institutional constraints, underscoring the limitations of purely economic explanations of migration.

From a governance perspective, the thesis highlights how states responded to the pandemic by strengthening border controls and integrating public health considerations into migration policy. While these measures were often framed as temporary and necessary, they reinforced state sovereignty and selectively restricted mobility. At the same time, limited flexibility was introduced through differentiated policies for specific migrant groups and essential sectors. These responses illustrate how migration governance during crises operates through a combination of restriction, selectivity, and pragmatic adjustment, rather than uniform closure.

At the micro level, the analysis of migrant vulnerabilities reveals that the social consequences of the pandemic were highly uneven. Migrants faced heightened economic insecurity, barriers to social protection, experiences of stigma and exclusion, and increased psychological stress. Digital technologies provided partial means of adaptation by enabling remote work and transnational communication, yet access to these resources was itself uneven, further reproducing social inequalities. The pandemic thus translated structural and policy-level changes into differentiated lived experiences among migrant populations.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic did not fundamentally reverse globalization or international migration, but rather accelerated existing trends toward selective mobility, risk-based governance, and unequal access to movement. Migration systems proved highly sensitive to crisis conditions, revealing their dependence on open borders and stable institutional arrangements. At the same time, the pandemic highlighted the need for more resilient and inclusive approaches to migration governance that can balance public health concerns with the protection of migrant rights.

This thesis contributes to the literature by linking migration theory, policy analysis, and migrant experiences within a single analytical framework. By conceptualizing the pandemic as a multidimensional shock affecting economic incentives, health security, and institutional barriers, the study offers a more integrated understanding of migration dynamics under crisis conditions. While the analysis is constrained by data availability and the evolving nature of the pandemic, it provides a foundation for future research on post-pandemic migration governance and the long-term implications of global health crises for international mobility.

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