

The impact of immigration campaigns

In order to reduce illegal immigration a series of high-profile initiatives were launched in July 2013, primarily using public information campaigns. Research has examined whether these types of campaigns were effective in achieving their objective and delivering the desired impact.

The research project Mapping Immigration Controversy, led by Dr Hannah Jones at the University of Warwick, aimed to identify the impacts of government migration policy and communication, and the interaction with public debate and activism. It specifically explored the impacts of high-profile Home Office campaigns against illegal immigration, in six local areas of the UK and at a national level.

The research examined the wider effects of the 'Go home or face arrest' pilot campaign (Operation Vaken) and associated activities. This July 2013 campaign involved a billboard mounted on vans driving around six London boroughs, displaying the text 'In the UK illegally? Go Home or Face Arrest. 106 arrests last week in your area', along with a contact number and an image of handcuffs.

Other campaigns and activities studied included signs in hospitals stating 'NHS hospital treatment is not free for everyone', high-profile immigration checks and raids in public spaces, and press liaison practices such as inviting journalists to accompany enforcement raids. The researchers explored the impacts of these initiatives on the public, the political debate and the responses of activists.

The research uncovered a range of responses, from white and ethnic minority British citizens, settled migrants with legal right to remain, and people who had uncertain migrant status. All of the responses were emotionally charged, most notably with anger and fear – both from people who were scared by the campaigns, and from people who were worried about migration.

Many in the general public find it difficult to distinguish between 'illegal' and 'legal' immigrants, and between asylum seeker and refugee.

Key findings

- Publicity campaigns with 'tough' messages on immigration increased anxiety and anger for a significant minority of people – including people opposed to immigration.
- Many in the general public find it difficult to distinguish between 'illegal' and 'legal' immigrants, and between asylum seeker and refugee - and indeed ethnic minority. Several people reported harassment for being 'illegal immigrants' when they had settled status, or were British citizens.
- No evidence was found that communication about immigration and enforcement was based on research about 'what works' in managing immigration.

Key findings - continued

- Communicating 'tough' messages on immigration seemed to provoke new waves of pro-migrant activism.
- There were local variations in how the campaigns were experienced, followed by variations in the responding activism.
- The researchers found inequality in political debate participation: some migrant activists felt they were unable to take part because of real or perceived repercussions for their residency status.
- There were several instances of hostility between different groups of migrants targeted by anti-immigration campaigns, often based on an idea that their own group was 'deserving' of residency while others were 'undeserving'.

Policy relevance and implications

- A strategy of demonstrating 'toughness' on immigration simply increases fear. Evidence-based representation of migration should be promoted by correcting and challenging factual misrepresentations in the media and public debate.
- Positive 'British values' should be promoted, for example by making clear that all people in the UK - whatever their migration or settlement status - are entitled to take part in public debate and democratic political activities, subject to and protected by the rule of law.
- Government and civil society institutions, on a national and local level, should lead public debate in discussing immigration in a historical context - including the legacy of colonialism, slavery and war - to develop a deeper public understanding of the issues connected to global and national migration.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Mapping Immigration Controversy is an 18-month research project that explores the impacts of Home Office publicity campaigns about migration on local communities and national debate. It was carried out by academic researchers from seven UK universities, in conjunction with local community organisations. The project was funded by the ESRC and by support in kind from four national civil society partners.

Web:
<http://mappingimmigrationcontroversy.com>

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Dr Hannah Jones, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick
 Email: h.jones.1@warwick.ac.uk

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.

Web: www.esrc.ac.uk
 ESRC communications team:
comms@esrc.ac.uk

The views expressed in this evidence briefing are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the ESRC.

Positive 'British values' should be promoted, for example by making clear that all people in the UK - whatever their migration or settlement status - are entitled to take part in public debate.