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Is migrant essential worker housing the key to systemic resilience during ongoing polycrisis? Learning from the variegated housing experiences and precarities of UK-based EU migrants during Covid-19 and Brexit

Anna Gawlewicz^a , Aneta Piekut^b , Molly Gilmour^c  and Sharon Wright^a 

^aUrban Studies and Social Policy, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ^bSheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK; ^cInternational Centre for Life, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

ABSTRACT

Health and socio-political crises combined during the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit (the UK's exit from the European Union) impacting the housing experiences of migrant essential workers. Major new research funded by the UK Economic and Social Council generated three datasets: an online survey ($n=1,105$) and interviews with 40 UK-based Polish essential workers and 10 stakeholders. The sequential exploratory mixed-methods analysis reveals housing precarity as the missing link in understanding systemic resilience during times of ongoing polycrisis. We find housing precarity is not only intersectionally differentiated and compounded for individual migrants but also creates society-wide vulnerabilities that undermine the labour market, economy and society. Essential workers whose financial situation worsened, job changed and/or employment was part-time were disproportionately affected. Youth, especially men with lower education, limited access to social security and insecure immigration status were particularly associated with moving home. Overcrowding was problematic because of housemates and landlords, with shared private rental accommodation exposing essential workers to health risks. Lack of access to green space was the element of housing precarity most clearly connected with worsening mental health. Better housing outcomes in Scotland imply that localised approaches in other countries might support essential work even within broader hostile immigration policy contexts.

KEYWORDS: Housing; precarity; migrants; Covid-19; Brexit

CONTACT Anna Gawlewicz  Anna.Gawlewicz@glasgow.ac.uk

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Introduction

Globally, economic, political and environmental crises tend to exacerbate housing precarity for long-settled and migrant populations alike (Greenop & Alvarez, 2025). However, migrants are worse affected because of their structurally disadvantaged position with limited access to secure jobs, healthcare and social support (Dutta & Rahman, 2023). Higher-income countries increasingly rely on precariously-homed migrants to do the jobs most vital for meeting their population's basic needs. Now that crises multiply and coincide so regularly that they constitute ongoing global conditions of polycrisis (Henig & Knight, 2023), we can no longer afford to ignore the impacts of housing precarity on the essential migrant workforce. We need to ask, does housing precarity undermine a nation's 'systemic resilience', i.e., its capacity to continue functioning during adversity (Anderson et al., 2021)? In this article, we begin answering this question by investigating UK migrant essential workers' housing experiences during the Covid-19 global health crisis and the socio-political shock of Brexit (Nakou, 2024).

Although housing insecurity among refugees and asylum seekers has received significant academic attention (Brown et al., 2024; Guma et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2020), the experiences of 'voluntary' migrants (typically relocating for economic, educational or other opportunities) remain under-explored (Soaita et al., 2023). Despite significant efforts to study low-wage migrant workers (Dutta & Rahman, 2023) and international students (Nasreen & Ruming, 2021), more comprehensive, intersectional approaches to migrant housing experiences are still scarce. Here, we address this gap by exploring a case study of the UK's Polish essential workers in a range of sectors and roles (both lower- and higher-paid), whose socio-economic profiles differ considerably in terms of gender, age, education and legal status. We also aim to understand how migrant workers' housing precarity (Clair et al., 2019; Debrunner et al., 2024; Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021) plays a role in systemic resilience given the noted absence of substantive research in this field (Anderson et al., 2021). In doing so, we advance conceptualisations of housing precarity as a *collective* experience with consequences for the entire society (rather than simply individual migrants).

Essential work refers to professions that maintain systemic resilience of key services such as healthcare, food production or public safety (Gilbert et al., 2021), enabling societies and economies to function in times of crisis. Migrant workers have been historically overrepresented in these jobs, especially in countries that rely on migrant labour such as the UK (Anderson et al., 2021). Here, we follow the UK and Scottish Government guidelines (UK Government, 2021) in focusing on the following essential work sectors: (1) health and social care, (2) food and necessary goods, (3) utility services, (4) transport, (5) public safety and national security, (6) key public services (e.g., justice, broadcasting), (7) teaching and child-care, (8) local and national government and (9) communication and financial services.

Polish nationals account for one of the largest non-British nationalities in the UK, with around 700,000 in England and Wales, comprising about 7.5% of the foreign-born population (ONS (Office for National Statistics), 2021). While there is a long history of Polish migration to the UK, these numbers are largely influenced by the recent migrations between the mid-2000s (with the encouragement of the UK Labour Government at the time) and late 2010s, following Poland's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. These migrants arrived in the UK as EU citizens under the freedom of movement policy. However, many lost their privileged status in the aftermath of Brexit. Poles already in the country but without UK citizenship were required to apply for a 'pre-settled' or 'settled' immigration status and new arrivals became subject to UK visa requirements. Polish workers are notably present in essential sectors and have faced socio-economic vulnerabilities and ethnic prejudice, especially in the context of Brexit (Narkowicz, 2023), making them an important case study.

The article is based on a wider study of Covid-19 impacts on Polish essential workers (Gawlewicz, 2025; Gawlewicz et al., 2024; Piekut, 2024). The UK provides valuable insights given the severity of Covid-19 impacts on the country and its restrictive response (e.g., stringent lockdown and social distancing measures), as well as the rising cost of living and housing crisis (Robertson, 2017). We first explore debates on migration and housing precarity followed by a discussion of our mixed-methods approach combining a survey ($n=1,105$) and qualitative interviews ($n=50$). We then focus on key findings spanning contrasting housing experiences, housing change and the housing-mental health nexus during the polycrisis of Covid-19 and Brexit.

Migration and housing precarity

Housing precarity refers to living conditions that are unstable, insecure, or unaffordable, posing risks to health and safety. A relatively new concept adapted from labour market precarity (Clair et al., 2019), it encompasses a range of experiences of housing markets and policies as well as the built environment itself (Debrunner et al., 2024). It has evolved from focusing on informal housing in lower- and middle-income countries to new and more diverse forms of housing insecurity and deprivation in higher-income countries, like the UK, including in the context of private rental (Lombard, 2023). What these often have in common are limited legal protection of tenants exposing them to financial, labour and sexual exploitation, increased risk of eviction, segregation and overcrowding, and unsafe living conditions, often in remote and poorly connected neighbourhoods leading to urban marginalisation (Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021; Nasreen & Ruming, 2021).

In recent years, housing precarity has worsened due to the polycrisis of housing and the cost-of-living crises, the Covid-19 pandemic, climate

emergency, and Brexit in the UK. International migrants have been disproportionately affected given systemic inequalities and market barriers stemming from their migrant status (Nasreen & Ruming, 2021; Soaita et al., 2023). This includes structural constraints in accessing secure jobs, steady income, social security and healthcare, limited knowledge of the local housing markets and practices, language barrier, non-recognition of professional qualification, bureaucratic delays, racism, discrimination and limited support networks (Crawford et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2020). These challenges often translate to overreliance on private rental and temporary, informal accommodation.

While historically, alongside migrants, private renters were predominantly students and young professionals, families with children and lower-income groups have increasingly moved to the sector, intensifying competition (McKee et al., 2020). This disproportionately impacts migrants, who may have structurally limited access to home ownership and social housing. Indeed, in the UK, 41% of the foreign-born population live in the rented sector compared with 15% of those UK-born (Lund, 2019 in Bouzarovski et al., 2022). This proportion goes up to 75% for recent migrants who have been in the country for less than five years (Perry, 2012).

Temporary and informal arrangements whereby migrants turn to social and diasporic networks for housing is also common, especially among newcomers, who often need to accumulate resources to improve their living situation, and those aiming to maximise income (e.g., to buy property in the receiving country or invest in one in their country of origin) (Lombard, 2023). These arrangements tend to lack legal agreements and protection and involve 'unconventional' setups such as couch-surfing, hot bedding, house-sitting, living in areas not designed for habitation (e.g., kitchens, extensions) or sharing spaces with strangers (Nasreen & Ruming, 2021; Perry, 2012). This poses various challenges not least in relation to overcrowding, low quality and lack of privacy, but also due to heightened dependency on landlords and fellow dwellers, and may lead to abuse and exploitation.

The Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, exposed the gravity of housing precarity faced by migrants. Boukari et al. (2023) demonstrated that migrants were 22% more likely to get infected compared to the long-settled population, with household overcrowding accounting for 36% of these increased odds. High-density living in small, inadequately ventilated spaces, practices associated with accommodation sharing, and overreliance on public transport (Dutta & Rahman, 2023; Morris et al., 2023) further contributed to increased exposure and reduced the effectiveness of mitigation measures (Hassani et al., 2023). Refugees and asylum seekers in state-provided housing were particularly impacted due to often unsanitary living conditions with limited access to cooking and heating facilities (Fouskas et al., 2022). In the UK, many were placed in emergency housing, where

they felt humiliated and dehumanised, reinforcing notions of ‘undeservingness’ of protection in times of crisis (Guma et al., 2024). Migrants were also more likely to experience homelessness during Covid-19 not least due to excessive job loss compounded by limited access to social security and support networks (Gawlewicz et al., 2024), but also because of what Stewart and Sanders (2023) call ‘cultivated invisibility’, a help-avoidance behaviour in the context of growing anti-immigration rhetoric and racist policies.

Naturally, whether in relation to Covid-19 or more broadly, housing situations differ significantly among migrants and are intersectionally differentiated across socio-economic and legal statuses, ethnicity, gender, age, employment and the length of residence in the receiving country. Those in more privileged circumstances (e.g., in higher-paid, higher-skilled jobs, with more secure immigration status, greater financial resources and access to information) may have fundamentally different experiences compared to those in structurally disadvantaged situations (e.g., in lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs, with restrictive immigration status, precarious employment and limited access to health and social support). Newly arrived migrants and those in job-dependent housing (e.g., domestic or agricultural workers) have been particularly exposed to abuse and ‘slum-like’ conditions (Di Gennaro et al., 2021; Dutta & Rahman, 2023). There is also a well-documented history of disadvantage among racialised migrants and ethnic minorities (Bouzarovski et al., 2022; Lukes et al., 2019; Stewart & Sanders, 2023), migrant women (Walsh et al., 2016) and younger migrants, especially international students (Morris et al., 2023; Nasreen & Ruming, 2021). These systemic inequalities and personal insecurities are closely linked to housing precarity with intersecting and compounding vulnerabilities. So far, these vulnerabilities have been mostly explored at an individual level (e.g., Greenop & Alvarez, 2025; McKee et al., 2021) and there is a need to reconceptualise them as *collective* experiences that concern migrants more broadly and carry implications for the labour market, economy and society at large. While migrant workers are key to maintaining systemic resilience (Anderson et al., 2021), this is contingent on strong worker rights and a range of socio-economic securities. Meanwhile, there has been no substantial research on the relationship between collective housing precarity and systemic resilience, and how the former may undermine national efforts to withstand and recover from shocks.

The situation is particularly complex in the UK, where the Conservative-led Government created a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants in 2012 (Webber, 2019; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). This consists of ‘policy and political measures aimed at hardening immigration regimes through intensifying levels of inhospitality, denial of protection and services, and exclusion’ (Gawlewicz & Yiftachel, 2022, p. 347). ‘Hostile environment’ measures in housing overwhelmingly affect migrants seeking asylum (Guma et al., 2024) and those in the private rental sector (PRS). While the former are beyond the scope of this article, the latter are subject to legal scrutiny

by often untrained sector landlords who are in effect turned into 'border police' and 'are required to monitor and potentially restrict migrants' access to housing' (McKee et al., 2021, p. 99). Landlords face sizable fines and a jail sentence in case of failure to conduct immigration checks causing fear of prosecution (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). This leads to exclusion and discrimination in the highly competitive British PRS forcing those whose immigration status may be difficult to prove to seek housing at 'the very margins of the market' (McKee et al., 2021, p. 102) and putting them at additional risk of exploitation, abuse and homelessness. The policy hits the hardest those who are already vulnerable and more likely to lose documents (e.g., migrants escaping domestic violence, victims of modern slavery, older people, homeless people) or are unable to evidence their legal status, often for reasons beyond their control (e.g., a delayed visa renewal) (McKee et al., 2021).

These challenges are further coupled with negative UK political discourse on immigration, especially among the central government's elites. Migrant groups are frequently blamed for causing housing problems, including the ongoing housing crisis, when in reality they bear the brunt of housing problems (Bouzarovski et al., 2022; Powell & Robinson, 2019). The increasingly unaffordable housing in the UK has also led to tensions between migrant and long-settled populations due to the scarcity of resources (Brown et al., 2024), hindering integration efforts (Phillips, 2006).

Although devolved governments do not have powers over UK-wide immigration policy, there are spatial differences in policy attitudes towards immigration. In Scotland, for example, there is 'a long-standing cross-party consensus on the need for immigration' (Kyambi & Kay, 2023, p. 4). The Scottish Government's welcoming and pro-EU vision for migration policy, prepared for the eventuality of political independence, offers to 'devise a humane, dignified and principled migration system and comprehensively reject Westminster's 'hostile environment' (2023, p. 1). Public attitudes in Scotland, while changeable and often contradictory, also tend to be more supportive, with most viewing immigration as key in addressing labour shortages and enriching cultural life (Kyambi & Kay, 2023).

There are, nonetheless, significant differences in housing policy between UK countries. In terms of governance and legislation, for instance, housing policy is set by the UK Government for England and Wales, but was devolved to the Scottish Government in 1999 (McKee et al., 2017). This translates to different approaches to tenant protection, more affordable social housing, rent control and support for those affected by homelessness – for whom there is a world-leading right to housing. In general, a more market-driven approach with lighter regulation of private landlords is followed in England, while Scotland has stronger tenant rights and social housing investment (Gibb, 2021).

It is also crucial to reflect on the relationship between housing and health. There is a general consensus that home ownership contributes to greater 'ontological security' and wellbeing while dwelling concerns

can lead to increased stress levels and declining mental health (Bentley et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2023; Kearns, 2022). The overall quality of housing including access to green spaces (e.g., public park, garden) is an important factor in positive mental health outcomes (Feng et al., 2022). Meanwhile, substandard, underheated and overcrowded housing has been associated with psychological distress and a range of illnesses such as influenza, fatigue, hypertension, heart attacks, asthma, other respiratory and infectious diseases, and seasonal mortality (Boomsma et al., 2017).

Despite this widely acknowledged relationship, and the growing interest in meanings of home (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011) and home-making among migrants (Boccagni, 2014), the intersection between housing and migrant health remains surprisingly underresearched (Soaita et al., 2023). Some notable exceptions draw attention to the 'unique and complex factors concerning vulnerability to homelessness and mental health' (Crawford et al., 2022, p. 15), psychological, emotional and physiological impacts stemming from a sense of insecurity at 'home', lack of privacy and control over living space (Lombard, 2023; Soaita et al., 2023), and inadequate conditions with restricted access to sanitation, water, and heating (Di Gennaro et al., 2021).

Against the backdrop of Covid-19 and Brexit, housing precarity within migrant communities demands academic and policy attention. Society relies on migrant essential workers, who often faced heightened exposure to infection at both work and home. This article confronts this challenge and demonstrates how housing precarity for international migrants affects systemic resilience.

Methodology

This is a mixed-methods article that combines insights about migrant essential workers' experiences of housing in the UK from survey responses ($n=1,105$) and in-depth qualitative interviews with 40 Polish essential workers and 10 stakeholders (from agencies supporting migrants and workers). The UK Research and Innovation/Economic and Social Research Council-funded project investigated *Health, social, economic and cultural impacts of Covid-19 on migrant essential workers in the UK* (2020–2023, grant ES/V0158771, Gawlewicz et al., 2024; Piekut, 2024; Gawlewicz, 2025). This major collaborative study was undertaken by researchers at the universities of Glasgow, Sheffield and Middlesex. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected online between January and August 2021. This offers a snapshot of experiences and perspectives during a turbulent period of multiple Covid-19 social distancing interventions and lockdowns that coincided with the end of the transition period of the UK's withdrawal from the EU (31 December 2020). Ethical approval was granted by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow (application ref. 400200070) and the University of Sheffield Ethics

(application ref. 037633). Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of participants.

From the outset, the research team worked collaboratively to ensure that the research strategy and instruments were developed using accurate insights from existing multi-method academic research, grey literature and UK population surveys. Questionnaire design was an iterative process that benefitted from close interrogation of topics and question wording by all project researchers, including qualitative and quantitative specialists. The explanatory sequential design (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008) included an online survey with Polish essential workers (using Qualtrics), ensuring responses from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, followed by qualitative fieldwork. An opt-in prize draw incentivised survey completion with six awards randomly allocated (two £100 and four £50 shopping vouchers). Since Polish essential workers are a hard-to-reach population, survey recruitment *via* existing networks and project partners was substantially enhanced by using Polish Facebook Ads to target eligible respondents (Pötzschke & Braun, 2017). Facebook Ads generated 66% of survey respondents ($n=735$) (see Piekut, 2024 for details and veracity analysis). 90% responded in Polish, rather than English.

Qualitative fieldwork, the second part of our explanatory sequential design (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008), was informed by the emerging survey results. Stakeholders were recruited *via* convenience and snowball sampling (Ritchie et al., 2014) and interviewed mainly in English. Migrant interviewees were offered a £20 gratitude voucher and accessed *via* two routes: a) existing networks and project partners; and b) a random sample drawn from the ~500 survey respondents who opted in and submitted their contact details, which are dissociated from their survey data. Gender was balanced in the sample, but an additional 20 interviewees were recruited from those who opted in *via* a short online questionnaire to ensure a balance of employment sector, job type and country within the UK. Overall, the qualitative sample included 15 participants in foods and necessary goods, 10 in health and social care, 5 in utility services, 4 in transport, 4 in teaching and childcare and 2 in public safety/national security, with around a third having a part-time job and a few having multiple jobs. These numbers were broadly reflective of the survey sample where 34.5% were in food and necessary products, 28.5% in health and social care, 7% in utility services, 9.6% in transport and 7% in teaching and childcare with 18.1% having a part time job and 7.9% having multiple jobs. Migrant workers were interviewed primarily in Polish. Most of the research team is bi-lingual and translated Polish verbatim quotes into English for publications, with an awareness of complicated individual and team positionalities, comprising migrant and non-migrant identities (Gawlewicz, 2016).

The initial phase of analysis separated the quantitative and qualitative datasets, with researchers split according to their methodological specialisms to organise and analyse data using Stata and NVivo respectively. A

shared qualitative coding schema was developed inductively by the qualitative investigators and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023) was used to develop insights from the qualitative data. In the survey, housing experience was operationalised as a number of adults living together, number of rooms in an accommodation (except kitchen and toilet), overcrowding (dividing the first variable by the second), a change in housing situation during the pandemic, and its reason, and access to green space (see Table A1 for question wording). We explored patterns in housing experience across key demographic characteristics and Covid-19 impacts on economic, social, cultural circumstances and mental health. The Online Supplementary Material (OSM) provides a full overview. We used chi-squared tests to identify statistically significant differences for the number of adults and rooms, and logistic regression to see how odds of housing change and access to green space vary for groups differently affected by the pandemic. Replication code for survey data analysis is available at the Open Science Framework repository: <https://osf.io/kmz4s/>.

Data integration was central to our mixed-method analysis and interpretation. Convergence protocols were used to compare quantitative and qualitative analyses for data interpretation, merge results and draw meta-inferences (Fetters et al., 2013). The systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative findings into side-by-side thematic summaries ensured a robust and comprehensive synthesis. A comparison of the 'fit' of results was then conducted, highlighting areas of agreement, discordance, expansion, complementarity and salient issues (Skamagki et al., 2024).

Housing precarity in the polycrisis of Covid-19 and Brexit

Our findings point to an interplay between the Covid-19 and Brexit elements of polycrisis, which intensified precarity for Polish/EU migrants in the UK in unique and dynamic ways.

Many EU citizens in the UK [have been] seriously struggling with mental health since 2016 [the year of the Brexit referendum], the pandemic only accelerated this. I feel very lonely and scared about my future. (Survey: M, no age provided, utility services, England)

I felt mostly uncertain about my future. It's not only about Covid-19 (...) but also Brexit as both happened about the same time. (Survey: M, 40s, health and social care, Scotland)

Covid obscured Brexit, so it's hard to say how things will turn out. (...) Covid might be controlled sooner or later, but the market situation [post-Brexit]... If it's tragic and [husband's name] won't be able to find a job, we'll have to move [internationally]. (Joanna, F, 40s, college administrator, teaching and childcare, England)

Covid-19 and Brexit notably coincided in the UK, and their effects are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated (Gawlewicz, 2025). While the

scope of this article permits only a limited discussion of this polycrisis, we stress that it was the combination of both that impacted on 'ontological security' (Brown et al., 2023), health and socio-economic circumstances (Gawlewicz, 2025; Gawlewicz et al., 2024) as well as housing. This was strikingly captured in stakeholder interviews. Lower-income migrants and those already in socio-economic precarity were expected to be particularly affected by disproportionately living in overcrowded, substandard and temporary accommodation (Boukari et al., 2023; Dutta & Rahman, 2023; Morris et al., 2023).

Many migrants who work in hotels are provided accommodation by their employer. When they were furloughed or made redundant (...) they lost their accommodation. That's a clear recipe for deprivation (...). It seems sensible if your employer's offering you accommodation but there's very limited financial resilience within the community. So when the cracks started to show things got to crisis point more quickly than in the general population. (Migrant support organisation)

Although this quote focuses on migrant workers in hospitality (who were not deemed 'essential' in the UK), it is symptomatic of some of the challenges encountered by Polish essential workers. In agriculture, for instance, accommodation is often linked to employment. For those workers, a job loss or a factory closure (e.g., due to a Covid-19 outbreak) translates not only to no income but also no living space. In the context of an international travel ban and social distancing measures, this creates an impossible situation and a direct pathway to homelessness (Stewart & Sanders, 2023).

While most of our research participants were not affected to such a degree, this is a reminder of the fragility of migrant workers in the vicious circle of compounding socio-economic and housing impacts. The sections below explore this precariousness by looking at a range of housing experiences, including accommodation change, and the housing-mental health nexus.

Contrasting experiences

An important manifestation of housing precarity is accommodation sharing. In our study, almost 23% of survey respondents lived in households with at least three adults, which we use as a proxy for that experience. Although some may have lived with family members, there are a few striking patterns when we break this figure by key demographics. For example, over 33% of the youngest age group (18–29) lived in households with at least three adults, whereas in the age group 30–44 this proportion was only 15%, going up again to 34% for the 45+ age groups. This means that both younger and older Polish essential workers were more likely to share accommodation. Likewise, men were more likely to live in this arrangement (28%) as well as those employed in the utility services (36%)

and food sector (27%), which are typically the lower-paid sectors in the UK. Education-wise, one in three people without higher education (33%) lived with two other adults, compared to one in seven (15%) among those with higher education (which is unsurprising, as migrant workers with lower education levels often have limited opportunities to access higher-income employment, constraining their housing options). Accommodation sharing was less common in Scotland (16%). Finally, people with insecure immigration status (as opposed to those with permanent residency or British citizenship) were also more likely to live in larger households (23%).

The intersection of the younger age, lower education and insecure immigration status may be associated with greater vulnerability, suggesting that the more vulnerable Polish migrants in our study were also more likely to face housing precarity. Survey results demonstrate that the experience of sharing accommodation overlapped with broader experiences of precarity during the pandemic, such as employment change (70% of those in 3+ adults households versus 64% in 1–2 adults households) or feeling financially worse off (44% of those in 3+ adults households versus 40% in 1-adult and 36% in 2-adults households).

Qualitative findings corroborate intersectional housing precarity among Polish essential workers. Our participants experienced contrasting housing circumstances with some living comfortably with access to multiple rooms or sharing with a partner/small immediate family while others found themselves in highly precarious arrangements including shared accommodation, insecure contracts or unusually small spaces. This is reflected in the quotes below.

[I live in] A semi-detached house with a small garden. (...) Three-bed house, nice. Lovely area. Quiet, calm. Great neighbours. Close to the school, to shops. In the suburbs - but it only takes 10 mins by car to the city centre. (Beata, F, 40s, nursing support worker, health and social care, England)

We [with partner] rent a room with a bathroom. Other people live in this house too. But we only share the kitchen. (...) There are four people living here now but there was a time [when] there were seven. (Lęśław, M, 20s, warehouse manager, food and necessary goods, England)

The level of housing comfort differed between survey respondents with 8% living in accommodation with up to one room (excluding kitchen and bathroom). Again, this was most common among young people (13%), those with insecure legal status (14%), and those who were refused a social security benefit (19%). At the same time, almost a third resided in places with at least four rooms.

Almost a half (49%) of those in small accommodation (up to two rooms) declared that their financial situation worsened during Covid-19, with the same applying to every third participant in housing with at least four rooms. Interviews shed more light on these conditions, especially more precarious situations involving rented and shared accommodation. Here

participants often focused on problems with uncaring landlords and housemates.

The house is run-down. (...) When we got the keys, we refreshed it, cleaned it. We bought furniture. Because there was nothing. (...) I'm not happy with it (...). We pay our rent regularly and he [the landlord] just doesn't care. But what can we do? (Grażyna, F, 40s, cleaner, utility services, England)

I moved out (...) because I couldn't stand my old house anymore. My housemates started arguing terribly. (...) It was mentally exhausting. (Sara, F, 20s, customer service, transport, England)

Migrant and stakeholder accounts indicate that some Polish essential workers lived in housing with insufficient personal space. To explore this, we derived an overcrowding indicator by comparing the number of adults to the number of rooms (excluding kitchen and bathroom) and defined overcrowding as an occupancy rate exceeding one adult per room. Overall, 11% of survey respondents lived in overcrowded accommodation.

We further explored intersections between characteristics with the most statistically significant differences in housing experiences. The patterns, presented in [Figure 1](#), demonstrate that overcrowding was most common among young men (26%), and young people with insecure legal status

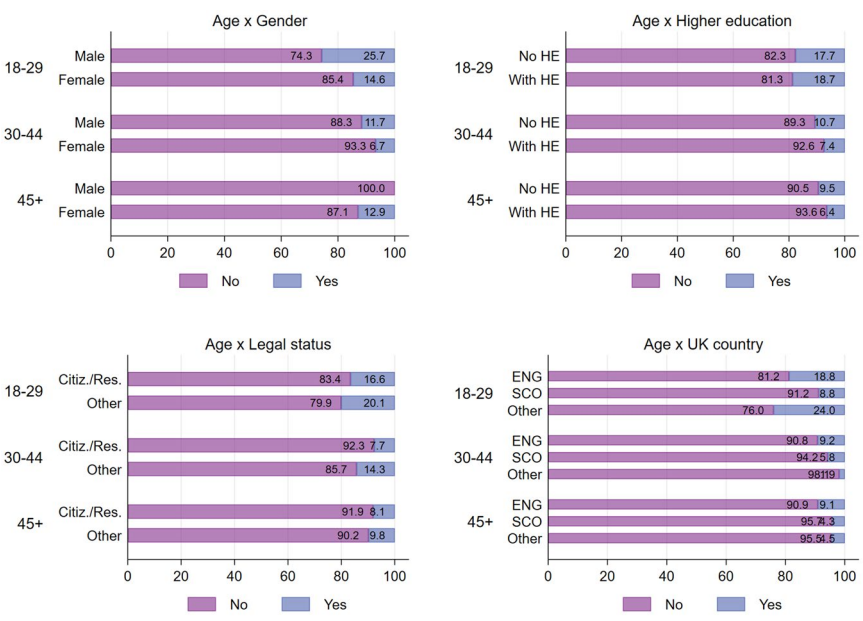


Figure 1. Overcrowding (1+ adult per room) across age groups by gender, education level, legal status and UK region.
Note: Legal status categories: Citizenship, residency or settled status vs. Other statuses, such as pre-settled status, no status or unknown to the respondent.

(20%) and higher education (19%). It was least common among men aged 45+ (none), those aged 30+ with higher education (6–7%) or secure legal status (8%), and young people in Scotland (9%). Overall, the overcrowding rate was lower and similar for men and women in Scotland, 6% ($n=351$), while in England it was 15% and 10%, respectively ($n=590$). Overcrowding rates among the general population are lower (England – 4.4%, Scotland – 2.4%; Official Statistics Scotland, 2022).

Housing change and adapting to the pandemic

Accommodation change during Covid-19 is another useful proxy for housing precarity. Over 10% of survey respondents ($n=110$) reported change including moving to a different address or shared accommodation, moving in with a partner or family members, taking a tenant or becoming homeless. Younger Poles (aged 18–29; 23%), those who were refused a social security benefit (31%), and those with insecure legal status (excluding settled status, permanent residency or citizenship; 24%) were more likely to change accommodation during Covid-19.

Accommodation change during Covid-19 corroborates findings from the previous section on accommodation sharing, overcrowding and interdependencies between housing precarity and labour market precarity. Almost half of those who changed accommodation did not hold a full-time job (compared to 30% of those with no such experience). As presented in Figure 2 – logistic regression adjusted for demographics – survey respondents who experienced housing change during the pandemic, also experienced change in employment situation, with their odds of housing change being 2.8 times higher than people without employment change ($OR = 2.8$; $p < 0.01$). They also reported being worse off financially since the beginning of the pandemic ($OR = 2.6$; $p < 0.01$). Full regression results are in Table O11 in OSM.

It is worth noting that 20% of respondents who reported accommodation change selected the 'Other' option and used an open-format field to specify the type of change. The reported changes included buying a property (the opposite of housing precarity, e.g., Easthope, 2004, McKee et al., 2020), somebody else moving out, and stopping to pay rent, among others. If we exclude those who reported buying a property (a very small proportion), the combined percentage of those who reported a precarious change (such as moving to another address, shared accommodation or not having a permanent address) remains considerable and reflective of wider experience of housing precarity.

In the context of Covid-19, a precarious change, or living conditions more broadly, took a significant toll on those sharing accommodation. This theme was particularly prominent in migrant interviews, with participants elaborating extensively on how they adapted to lockdown and social distancing measures.

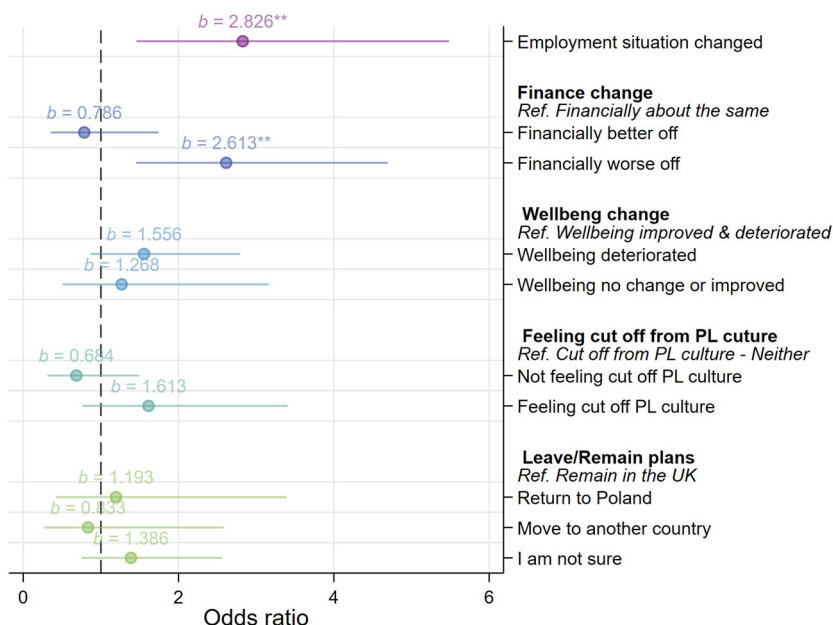


Figure 2. Logistic regression results predicting accommodation change.

Note: Separate models. Adjusted/Controlled for gender, age, education, sector, legal status, full time job and UK country. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

When five adults live together and everyone goes to work... They [housemates] work in a waste sorting plant, so they had to work (...). She [another housemate] worked all the time too. Went out, had a lot of contact with people because she's a manager (...). There was always a risk of infection, right? (...) I asked them to wash their hands every time they returned home. (...) We share a bathroom, a small kitchen and a living room. There's no way [to maintain social distancing]. (Grażyna, F, 40s, cleaner, utility services, England)

There was no room, no chance to be on your own... Very small flat - as in everyone knows when you use the toilet. (...) My mum and son kept panicking because I'm a nurse. (...) There were situations where I'd sit in my car for 40 mins after a 13-hour shift so they wouldn't see me cry. (Helena, F, 30s, nurse, health and social care, Wales)

Clearly, for these interviewees essential worker status amplified the Covid-19 risks on the one hand and housing precarity on the other. Importantly, accommodation sharing was not always seen as problematic. Those living with family members often viewed it as an opportunity to split caring responsibilities (e.g., childcare). It was mostly those who shared accommodation with strangers that felt particularly anxious and raised concerns about their health and wellbeing.

Housing, green space and mental health

In debates surrounding the housing-mental health nexus under Covid-19, access to green spaces (understood as both public and private, e.g., park, garden) has been suggested as a useful measure of wellbeing (Feng et al., 2022). In our study, 8% of survey respondents reported no access whatsoever. Those participants were predominantly younger (11%), worked in lower-paid sectors like utility services (14%), and had insecure legal status (14%), attesting to intersectional precarity again.

We modelled access to green space against other impacts of the pandemic (logistic regression). Figure 3 captures that no access to green spaces is significantly associated with more frequent declarations of worsening mental health (OR = 5.5; $p < 0.001$) and, marginally, with the intention to return to Poland (OR = 2.2; $p < 0.1$), which was often influenced by Brexit (Gawlewicz, 2025). Simultaneously, access to these spaces was not strongly associated with the pandemic-related change in employment, financial situation or being cut off from Polish culture. Crucially, people whose wellbeing deteriorated during the pandemic in comparison to those with ambivalent wellbeing change (both improved and deteriorated) were 5.5 times more likely to have no access to green space (full regression results are in Table O12 in the OSM).

Access to green spaces was also a prominent theme in qualitative datasets. Participants elaborated on how being in green environments

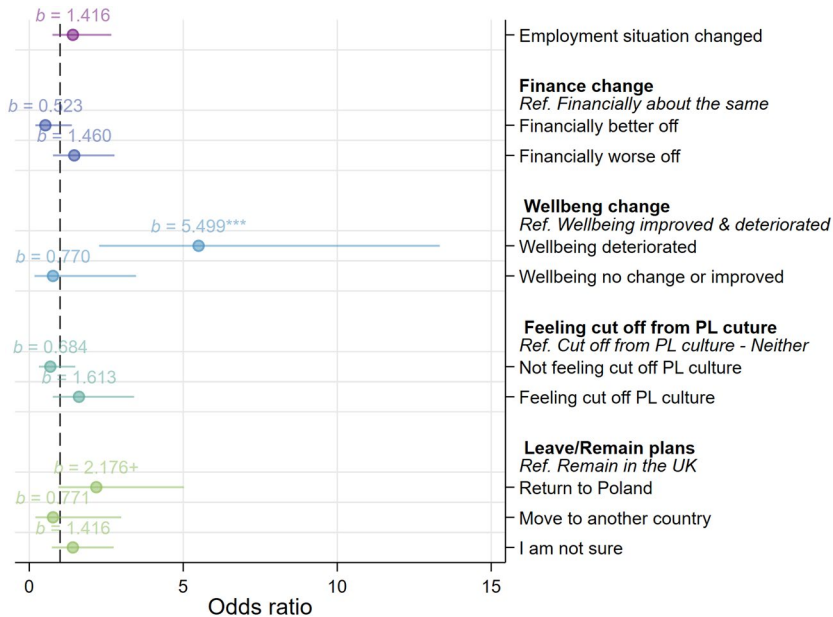


Figure 3. Logistic regression results predicting access to green space.

Note: Separate models. Adjusted/Controlled for gender, age, education, sector, legal status, full-time job and UK country. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

made a real difference to their wellbeing. Some reflected on the therapeutic benefits of gardening, in particular growing food.

It was a bit better when the sun was out and the restrictions were less severe, and you could just go out, take the kids out. But at the beginning everything was closed, even the parks. Luckily, we moved homes and have a large garden now. (Dominika, F, 30s, factory worker, food, Scotland)

The garden saved us. It really saved us. (Ewa, F, 30s, kitchen worker in a care home, food, Wales)

Everything started falling apart... Luckily, we had the allotment. (...) And I think this really kept us [sane] (...). If I had to sit at home, I don't know, on the fifth floor in a block of flats, and just look out through the windows - you can shoot yourself in the head. (...) The allotment pushed us to live again. (...) Watching that something, a radish, starts growing in this dead soil. (...) And the physical work, the sun, being outdoors, this helped me a lot. (Grzegorz, M, 40s, baker in a supermarket, food and necessary products, Scotland)

Alongside contemplating the significance of green spaces, participants reflected on the relationship between lockdown and mental health, with those in more precarious housing circumstances often experiencing symptoms of isolation, anxiety, and depression. Mental health decline was less often reported by those living with two more adults (52%, in comparison to 55% average), and worse for those living in the smallest housing of 0–1 rooms (62%), likely on their own. The emotional toll of the isolation was particularly captured in responses to the open survey question.

I feel like a slave. A prisoner in my own home. (Survey: F, 50s, food and necessary goods, Northern Ireland)

My mental health got much worse. Physical too as I've put on weight. Less mobility, sitting at home 24 hours a day led to very low self-esteem, nervous breakdown and professional burnout. (Survey: F, 40s, communications and financial services, Scotland)

Open survey responses were more emotionally charged than online interviews. Participants might have felt more comfortable disclosing mental health struggles anonymously. Timewise, the survey coincided with a stringent lockdown while interviews were conducted during a less restrictive time allowing for international travel. These responses nonetheless reflect the severity of Covid-19 impacts on migrant health compounded by Brexit, with 54% of survey respondents reporting a decline (Gawlewicz et al., 2024).

Summary of the results

Table 1 below captures key patterns and themes within qualitative and quantitative datasets as well as the relationships/fitness between both. Overall, findings from quantitative and qualitative data are in **convergence**

and confirm each other regarding housing experiences in the polycrisis of Covid-19 and Brexit, including housing precarity among some Poles, interplay between housing, legal and economic precarity, and the importance of access to green space for mental health. Some findings overlap allowing further interpretation and **expansion** (Skamagki et al., 2024); patterns detected in the survey show specific groups holding more negative housing experiences during the pandemic, such as younger people, especially young men, those without higher education or secure legal status, and not living in Scotland. Due to the different nature of data, both results emerging from the survey and interviews are **complementary**: they offer a different perspective on housing experiences, but do not

Table 1. Mixed-methods convergence table and data fit.

	Survey (key pattern)	Interviews (themes summary)	Data fit
<i>Housing experiences</i>	Overcrowding is most common among young men, with no higher education, no secure immigration status and in England.	Overcrowding presented as a major challenge in stakeholder interviews. Contrasting experiences in migrant interviews: precarity vs. comfort. Uncaring landlords/ housemates often discussed in relation to shared accommodation .	Confirmation of overcrowding affecting some workers. Expansion – survey captures patterns about the characteristics and location of overcrowding. Complementarity – interviews capture specific problems in shared accommodation.
<i>Housing change, financial/job vulnerabilities and adaptation</i>	Compounded precarity – housing situation change associated with economic precarity (financially worse off, employment change and no full-time job).	Contrasting experiences in migrant interviews, with convergence of housing and economic precarity . Adapting to the pandemic often discussed in relation to shared accommodation .	Confirmation – about who needed to adapt to new or challenging conditions. Expansion – survey shows specific aspects of economic precarity overlap with housing precarity. Complementarity – interviews show specific adaptation strategies for those in shared accommodation.
<i>Mental health</i>	Lack of green space is strongly associated with worsening mental health .	Access to green space associated with wellbeing. Focus on using private/public green spaces in migrant interviews.	Confirmation – the importance of green space for mental health. Complementarity – qualitative material emphasises ways of engagement with green spaces.

contradict each other (Skamagki et al., 2024). Qualitative material provides additional insights about housing insecurity and the need to adapt among people sharing accommodation.

Conclusions

In this article, our explanatory sequential mixed-methods case study (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008) of the UK's Poles reveals how Covid-19 and Brexit combined in polycrisis to shape the housing experiences of migrant essential workers. In doing so, we add knowledge about 'voluntary' migrants, who are often overlooked in housing debates (Soaita et al., 2023). Merging the survey of 1,105 and qualitative interviews with 40 migrants and 10 stakeholders, we drew meta-inferences and observed convergence (Skamagki et al., 2024) around compounded intersectional housing precarity among Polish essential workers. While some lived comfortably, others faced highly precarious conditions, including a major change in living arrangement during the exceptional moment of the pandemic. Socio-economic and legal statuses and pre-existing structural disadvantages (e.g., insecure employment or immigration status) were clearly associated with greater housing precarity. Perhaps surprisingly, it was not minority ethnic women who were the most precarious (e.g., Walsh et al., 2016). Younger people (particularly men), those with lower levels of formal education, insecure immigration status, and residing outside of Scotland, were worst affected.

Brexit fundamentally undermined ontological security (c.f. Brown et al., 2023) for many participants who simultaneously faced new Covid-19 challenges. Migrant essential workers were at heightened risk of infection not only because of their jobs but also their substandard housing conditions, which often prevented social distancing and privacy. Workers whose job it was to keep everyone safe, were unsafe themselves. This polycrisis of Covid-19 and Brexit created unique dimensions of housing precarity associated with overcrowding, shared living with strangers, and no/limited access to green spaces. Both health and housing experiences involved high levels of emotional strain, and were detrimental to mental health.

In higher-income countries, ongoing polycrisis conditions are likely to exacerbate housing precarity among the relied upon migrant essential workforce. Housing is crucial for ensuring systemic resilience. Our findings offer scope for international policy learning in that regard. At UK-wide level migration policy aims to repel migrants *via* a deliberate 'hostile environment' (McKee et al., 2021) and migrants are excluded from housing policies (Crawford et al., 2022; Kearns, 2022). However, Scotland's devolved housing policy operates within a more welcoming political and public context. Scotland's rights-based and more humane approach to both housing and (albeit without legislative powers) migration appeared to contribute to more positive housing experiences for European essential workers during Covid-19, especially young men. Much can be done, therefore, to improve migrant housing experiences even within broadly anti-immigration

political and policy contexts. Despite constraints, sub-national, municipal and local governments can intervene effectively, as can social/private landlords and tenant rights organisations. Likewise, adequate, sustainable housing, alongside high-quality jobs and comprehensive social protection can contribute to retaining migrant workers to mitigate labour shortages and population ageing (Hof et al., 2021).

Detrimental housing experiences tend to be understood in the international literature as a concern for disadvantaged individuals or migrants as a vulnerable social group (e.g., Greenop & Alvarez, 2025; McKee et al., 2021). Our analysis of ‘voluntary’ migrants doing the jobs needed to keep the UK functioning during Covid-19 and Brexit reveals something new at a societal level. Housing precarity undermined the capacity of migrants to do the work that was essential to support the lives, safety and health of the whole population (e.g., supporting supply chains for food and water, providing emergency healthcare and sanitation). Here we reorientate the debate by introducing (*collective*) housing precarity as a missing link in understanding systemic resilience during times of polycrisis. When governments fail to protect essential workers from precarious housing, they may create systemic vulnerability that weakens their country’s resilience to adversity.

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ORCID

Anna Gawlewicz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0620-3226>

Aneta Piekut  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3478-0354>

Molly Gilmour  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3995-2936>

Sharon Wright  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6312-6052>

Data availability statement/data deposition

Qualitative dataset: <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856576>. Survey dataset: <https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.23739624>.

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Table A1. Survey question wording.

Measure	Survey question wording	Response options	Measurement in data analysis
Housing experience			
Number of adults	A household covers people living at the same address who share cooking facilities and/or a bathroom and/or a living room. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?	[Select number]	Number of adults: 1, 2, 3+
Number of rooms	How many rooms (apart from the bathroom and kitchen) are there in your current accommodation?	[Select number]	Number of rooms: 0–1, 2, 3, 4+
Overcrowding	Calculated by dividing the number of adults by number of rooms	No adults/no rooms	No/Yes (if value >1)
Accommodation change	Has your living arrangement changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic?	Yes/No/Prefer not to say	No/Yes
Accommodation change – reason	How has your living arrangement changed? Please select all that apply	I moved to another address in the UK /I started living with my partner/I moved to my parents, siblings or another family member/An adult family member other than my partner (e.g., sibling, parent) has moved into my address/An unrelated adult (e.g., lodger) has moved into my address/ I moved to shared accommodation/ I do not currently have a permanent residential address (examples)/I moved out of the UK/Other, please specify ...	<i>Not transformed</i>
Access to green space	Do you have easy access to a green space (e.g., a garden or public park)?	Yes/No/Prefer not to say	Yes/No
COVID-19 pandemic impacts			
Employment change	Has your employment situation changed during the Covid-19 pandemic (since March 2020) in any of the following ways? Select all that apply	12 reasons listed to select, e.g., taken on multiple jobs; have been made redundant; hours have been increased or reduced; furlough.	No/Yes
Financial change	Overall, how do you feel your current financial situation compares to the period before the Covid-2019 pandemic?	I'm much better off/I'm a little better off/I'm about the same/I'm a little worse off/I'm much worse off/Prefer not to say	Better off/About the same/Worse off

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

Measure	Survey question wording	Response options	Measurement in data analysis
Wellbeing change	How has your wellbeing changed during the Covid-19 pandemic?	It has significantly improved/It has somewhat improved/It has improved in some ways and deteriorated in others/It has somewhat deteriorated It has significantly deteriorated/No change/Prefer not to say	Deteriorated/Both/Improved & No change.
Feeling cut off Polish culture	I feel cut off from Polish culture (e.g., shops, services, community) in the UK because of the Covid-19 pandemic	Strongly disagree/Somewhat disagree/Neither agree nor disagree/Somewhat agree/Strongly agree	Disagree/Neither/Agree
Stay/leave plans	When it comes to living in the UK, what is your plan for the next 5 years?	I plan to return to Poland/I plan to move to another country (not Poland)/I plan to remain in the UK I am not sure/Prefer not to say	<i>Not transformed</i>