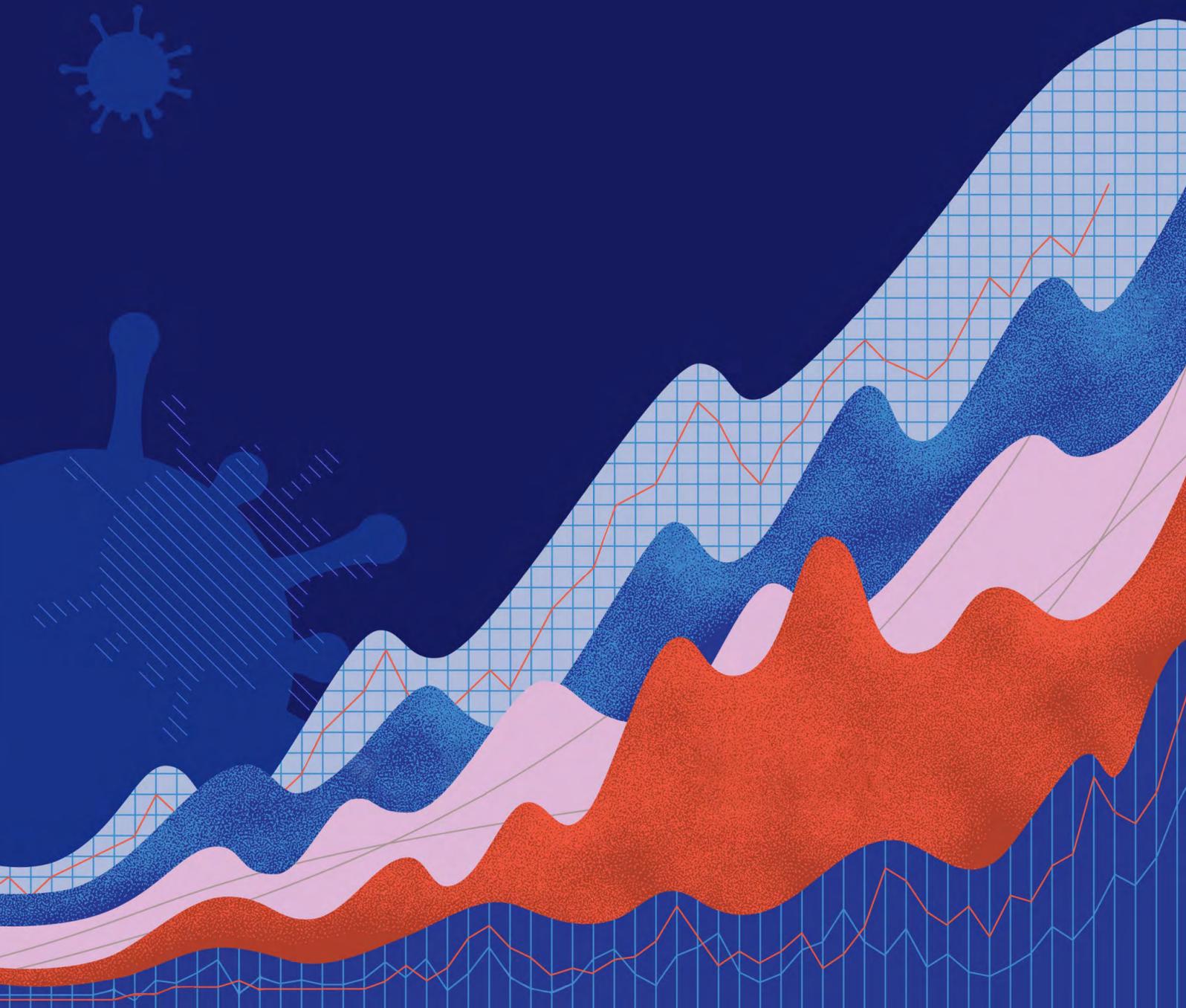




Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



**Rapid needs assessment:
Covid-19 related vulnerabilities, risks and
needs among third country migrants
in Georgia**





Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Rapid needs assessment:
**Covid-19 related vulnerabilities, risks and
needs among third country migrants
in Georgia**

FULL REPORT

April 30, 2020

Executive summary

A Rapid Needs Assessment was conducted by IOM on April 8-16 2020 to provide a much-needed insight into the most pressing challenges that third country migrants face in Georgia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The assessment focused on groups of migrants who are presumed or known to suffer disproportionate negative effects in public health emergencies, including irregular migrants, low income/low skilled migrant workers, foreign students and rejected asylum seekers. In particular, some of the surveyed communities included foreign students in Georgian State Universities in Tbilisi, agricultural workers from South-East Asia in Kakheti region, sex-workers from Central Asia in Adjara region, low-income migrant workers from West Africa and Middle East in Tbilisi largely employed in hospitality and tourism, and many other migrant communities across Georgia. Out of those surveyed, most migrants came from South East Asia (with majority from India), followed by the Middle East (with majority from Jordan and Egypt), Eastern Europe/Central Asia (with majority from Azerbaijan and Ukraine) and Africa (with majority from Nigeria) and were males younger than 25.

A total of 225 respondents, including 213 migrants and 12 key informants, located in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi and Rustavi, revealed that the most acute needs stem out of the loss of income. This is especially true for those working in professions affected by the COVID-19, those who had been receiving financial support from their families abroad or relying on part time, informal jobs to support their studies and living costs. Secondly, respondents reported lack of information about the COVID-19 situation, including State of Emergency protocols and eligibility for free of charge testing and treatment in case of related symptoms. Respondents also identified a need for legal assistance, highlighting especially the need for assistance with regularization of stay and better understanding of rights of foreigners, as well as support in relation to affordability and quality of their housing. Foreign students also reported lack of access to reliable internet and facilities so they could pursue now mandated online education.

The survey revealed limitations in access to health care among the target groups, as well as general reluctance among migrants to seek health care in Georgia, citing issues of affordability, mistrust and fears related to legal status or occupation in the case of sex workers, as well as language barriers. While majority of respondents spoke either Georgian or English, the issue may arise if Georgian medical workers providing medical care cannot speak English and communicate with the patients. Posing a threat to public health in the country, the assessment confirmed limited awareness of recommended prevention measures due to lack of public information targeting foreigners in languages they can understand, as well as lack of personal protective equipment which respondents noted was hard to obtain or buy. A significant proportion of respondents reported cohabitating in overcrowded living quarters such as low-cost hostels and dormitories, hindering their ability to control the amount of risk and exposure to health risks.

In addition to high levels of anxiety resulting from job insecurity and restrained living situation, a quarter of respondents reported they had been subjects of hostile behavior, including discrimination, verbal abuse and in some instances, physical violence. On the positive side, while a third of respondents have considered returning to their country of origin due to COVID19 situation, a majority felt safe about staying in Georgia. With most respondents noting they held informal jobs, their exclusion from COVID-19 income support schemes, housing provision programmes or rental subsidies/exemptions may be expected and could further impact migrants' livelihood and income insecurity in Georgia.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, IOM will seek to address the identified needs and gaps in the coming period in line with the following recommendations:

- ✓ Increased public information and communication on COVID-19 prevention, protocols and measures, targeting third country migrants in languages they can understand
- ✓ Facilitation of access to necessary medical assistance
- ✓ Enhanced provision of legal assistance in relation to regularization of the stay and better understanding of migrants' rights
- ✓ Provision of psychosocial counseling to third country migrants in vulnerable situations
- ✓ Public awareness campaigns countering xenophobia and promoting diversity, solidarity and tolerance
- ✓ Assistance with return to the country of origin
- ✓ Establishment and promotion of regulated migration schemes that benefit individuals and communities
- ✓ Capacity building for government stakeholders in the field of migration governance
- ✓ Empowering civil society to conduct advocacy, research and complement government efforts to provide adequate support to this vulnerable group
- ✓ Facilitation of the access to online education for foreign students

IOM's response

In support of the Government of Georgia and in partnership with the civil society, IOM plans to work to increase public information flow to the targeted population through support with public information campaigns, establishment of a social media platform to enhance communication flow and provide counseling and development on an online application to inform migrants about legal stay, services, assistance and safe migration practices. Seeking to strengthen expertise of the civil society, IOM will also support provision of legal assistance and psychosocial counseling to third country migrants, as well as engage in public awareness campaigns to counter xenophobia and promote tolerance and solidarity. IOM will continue to support eligible migrants' return to the country of origin through the Assisted Voluntary Return program and work to highlight benefits of a well-regulated migration. Finally, IOM will partner with government stakeholders to strengthen capacity and exchange best practices on migration governance.

Migrants' presence in Georgia: background on demographics

While Georgia remains a net emigration country, it records steady influx of immigrants, including those from more distant destinations. Over 78 thousand foreign nationals were classified as immigrants in Georgia in 2019¹. However, the number of persons holding another citizenship resident in the country appears to be substantially higher – the 2014 census revealed 184,629 citizens of foreign countries in Georgia (52% coming from Russia, followed by Greece, Ukraine, Germany, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey). Of those, 11,751 held only foreign citizenship. While a significant part of the foreign-born residents are Georgians who moved to the country following the breakup of the USSR, substantial inflows have been observed since 2015 but due to lenient entry and residence controls, it is difficult to estimate the actual scale of immigration into Georgia.

Notably, migrants from countries that are more distant geographically have begun to appear in Georgia – for purpose of education (between 2006 and 2016, the total of 2,297 Indian, 1,243 Nigerian and 803 Iraqi students enrolled at Georgian universities and colleges) or work (in 2015-2018 the total of 7,173 work permits were granted to citizens of China, 4,357 to nationals of India and 2,896 to citizens of Iran). Another type of activity, undertaken by foreigners is entrepreneurship – top countries of origin of foreign business holders are Iran, Turkey, Egypt, India, Russia and Ukraine. Another group of foreigners includes asylum-seekers – between 2015 and 2018, overall, 4,306 applications for asylum were placed in the country. By the end of 2018, there were 1,171 refugees and persons holding humanitarian status registered in Georgia. The majority of them are citizens of Iraq and Ukraine².

Examples of specific communities reached by the survey:

- ➔ Foreign students in Georgian Universities in Tbilisi and Kutaisi
- ➔ Agricultural workers from South-East Asia in Kakheti region
- ➔ Sex-workers from Central Asia in Adjara region
- ➔ Low-income migrant workers from West Africa and Middle East in Tbilisi, largely employed in hospitality and tourism

¹ UNDESA (2019)

² State Commission on Migration Issues, 2019 Migration Profile of Georgia

Sample

- ➔ Phone surveys were conducted by IOM and 4 partner NGOs between 8-16 April 2020.
- ➔ Migrants targeted by the survey fall under one or more of the following categories: irregular migrants, undocumented migrants, low-skilled/low-income migrant workers, foreign students, and rejected asylum seekers.
- ➔ 213 individual migrant respondents were selected at random and through snowball method by NGO partners working with pre-defined target groups.
- ➔ 12 key informants were interviewed to complement migrant survey with ability to provide information on particular communities of interest: religious and other community leaders, social workers and local municipality representatives, restaurant owners, university administrators, and foreign Embassy representatives.
- ➔ Distribution of the sample corresponds to the estimated distribution of target groups across the territory of Georgia, with expected concentration in largest urban centers – Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi and Rustavi.
- ➔ The Rapid Needs Assessment questionnaire, deployed in English, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic languages covered the respondents' personal profile, needs and awareness related to the COVID-19 pandemic and security measures, and future-related mobility intentions.

Sample characteristics:

In contrast to the population demographics, the [sample distribution](#) reflects the assessment's focus on particular groups of migrants who are presumed or known to suffer disproportionate negative effects in public health emergencies, face higher precarity of access to health and government services, or are otherwise vulnerable – e.g. due to nature of work (sex work) or due to immigration status (clandestinity) and language limitations. The demographics of the sample are thus determined not only by the general profile of third country nationals in the country of Georgia, but also by the (previously undescribed) profile of the following groups presently residing in Georgia:

- ➔ irregular migrants
- ➔ low-skilled/low-income migrant workers
- ➔ foreign students
- ➔ rejected asylum seekers³.

³ While asylum holders were not targeted by the survey, a number of protection status holders were interviewed by chance.

- ▶ 62% of respondents in the sample self-identified as male, 33% as female (remaining chose not to disclose gender)
- ▶ Migrants in the sample spent 27 months in Georgia on average (median value is 18 months, with 13% having spent 5-15 years)
- ▶ 98% reside in urban areas (81% in Tbilisi, 4.3% in Kutaisi, 10.3% in Batumi, and 2% in Rustavi)
- ▶ 75% of respondents are single and childless. Out of the remaining 25% who are parents, 10.3% have a partner and children with them in Georgia, 9.4% have children outside of Georgia, and nearly 2% are single parents with children in Georgia
- ▶ 41% of migrants surveyed live in shared living space together with others who are not their family, experiencing potential higher levels of exposure to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 20% live together with family and 28% live alone
- ▶ 8.2% were irregular, 14% rejected asylum seekers, and 7% refugees. Others did not disclose or hold a valid residence permit
- ▶ The survey reached migrants of 26 different nationalities, with largest representation of those from India, Jordan, Egypt, Nigeria, Iran and Iraq

↓ **Distribution of respondents' countries of origin in the needs assessment, contains 4 most prominent regions of origin**

South-East Asia	42.72%
India	77
Pakistan	8
China	4
Myanmar	1
Malaysia	1
total	91

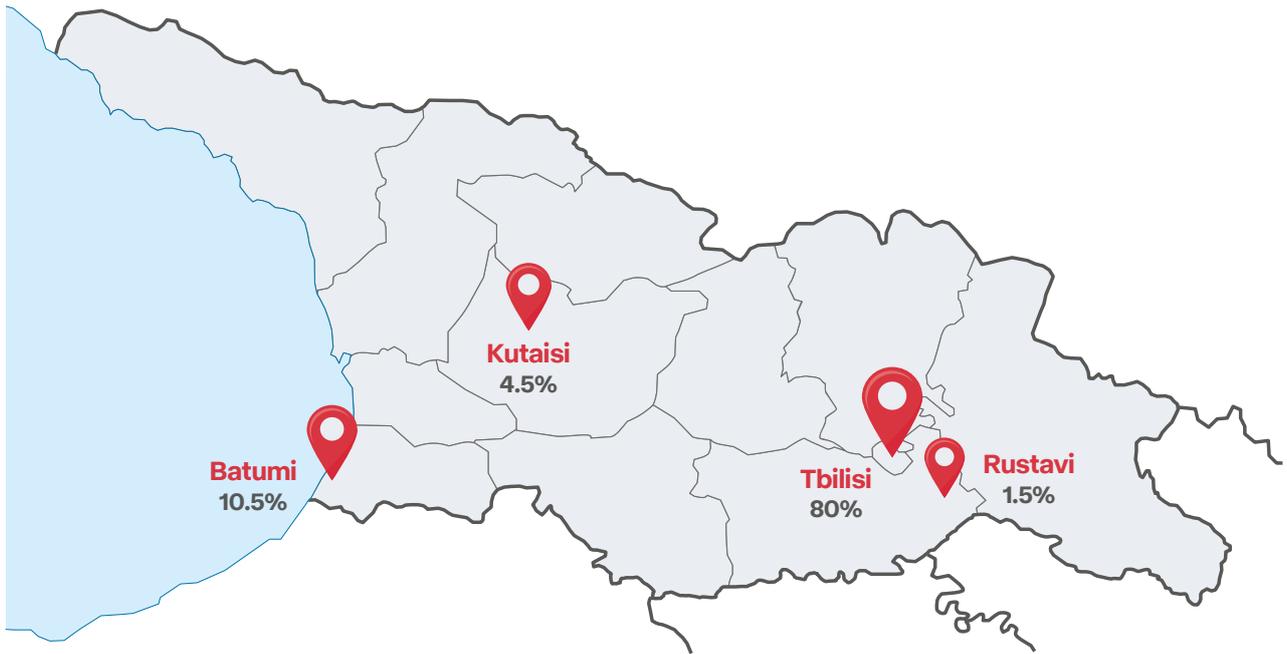
Middle East & Gulf	35.68%
Jordan	24
Egypt	19
Iran	9
Irak	8
Syria	5
Israel	4
Yemen	4
Lebanon	2
Bahrain	1
total	76

East Europe & Central Asia	9.86%
Azerbaijan	4
Ukraine	4
Turkey	3
Armenia	3
Russia	2
Kazakhstan	2
Azerbaijan and Turkey*	2
Kyrgyzstan	1
total	21

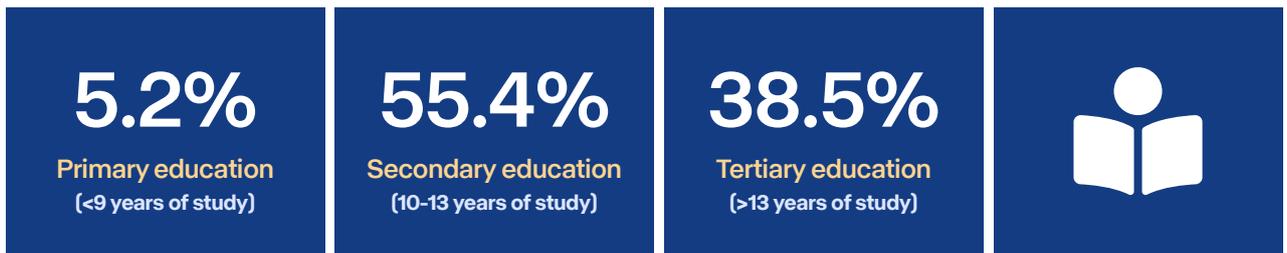
Africa	9.39%
Nigeria	10
Eritrea	5
Cameroon	2
Somalia	1
Ethiopia	1
Sudan	1
total	20

* double citizenship

↓ Geographic distribution of respondents in Georgia*

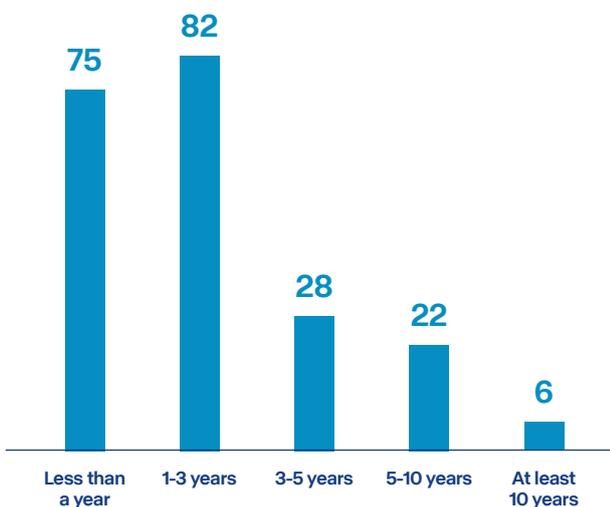


* Map serves illustrative purposes only

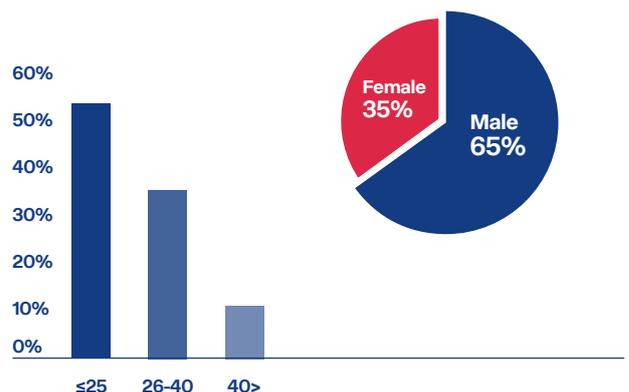


→ Surveyed migrants typically held high school education background, with a significant proportion of higher education students. This distribution is assumed to be skewed as lower educated respondents are harder to reach within a short time frame.

↓ Distribution of respondents by time lived in Georgia

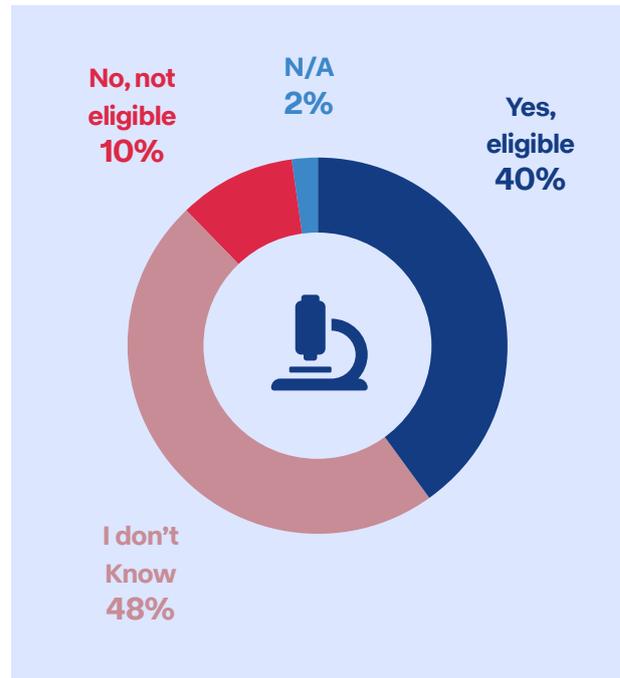


↓ Age and gender profile of the sample:



Snapshot of needs related to the Covid-19:

- ▶ Survey results confirm that migrants are severely affected by the pandemic and related restrictions: 37% report that they or someone in their family lost income due to COVID-19, and 66% do not have any savings.
- ▶ Most acute needs identified result from loss of income (direct or indirect) and lack of access to information. Housing needs (quality and affordability) and residence/ visa related legal needs were also frequent.
- ▶ 22% indicate they have been a victim of hostile behavior in Georgia, though only few identified their experience with xenophobia as related to COVID-19.
- ▶ 31% of respondents are hesitant to visit a doctor, with most frequent reason being inability to afford care. 62% do not have medical insurance in Georgia.
- ▶ Among the most vulnerable are migrants engaged in sex-work who report acute needs and face barriers to seeking medical care or accessing government services.
- ▶ 71% declared that they feel comfortable staying in Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic.



- ➔ **60% of migrants surveyed were not aware that COVID-19 testing and treatment would be free for them in Georgia in case of experiencing symptoms. All those surveyed were provided with the correct information and latest recommendations issued by the Government of Georgia on prevention and access to health care during the pandemic.**

Migrant vulnerability to Covid-19: evidence from Georgia

As in many other crises, migrants may be particularly vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19. Their ability to avoid infection, receive adequate health care and cope with the economic, social and psychological impacts of the pandemic can be affected by a variety of factors, including: their living and working conditions, lack of consideration of their cultural and linguistic diversity in service provision, xenophobia, their limited local knowledge and networks, and their access to rights and level of inclusion in host communities, often related to their migration status⁴.

⁴ IOM (2020) Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis, IOM Migration and Research Series, no.60.

Challenges experienced by migrants can be shared with local population, especially where related to capacity, accessibility and quality of the local health care system. Nevertheless, a number of characteristics typical for migrants and their circumstances, as well as precarity of legal status among this population generate additional barriers of access to prevention, care, psychosocial and socio-economic support. With this understanding, IOM has developed a framework for assessing migrants' vulnerability to COVID-19⁵, which will be employed to analyze the findings from IOM Georgia's rapid needs assessment. The framework outlines categories of challenges and experiences expected among COVID-19-affected migrant populations. The following pages will show to what extent the theoretical framework is reflected in the experiences of migrant populations in Georgia, and assess whether they are facing increased likelihood of: a) contracting COVID-19 and not accessing appropriate care, b) suffering significant psychosocial impacts, and c) facing severe livelihood and income insecurities.

Increased likelihood of contracting Covid-19 and not accessing appropriate care: evidence

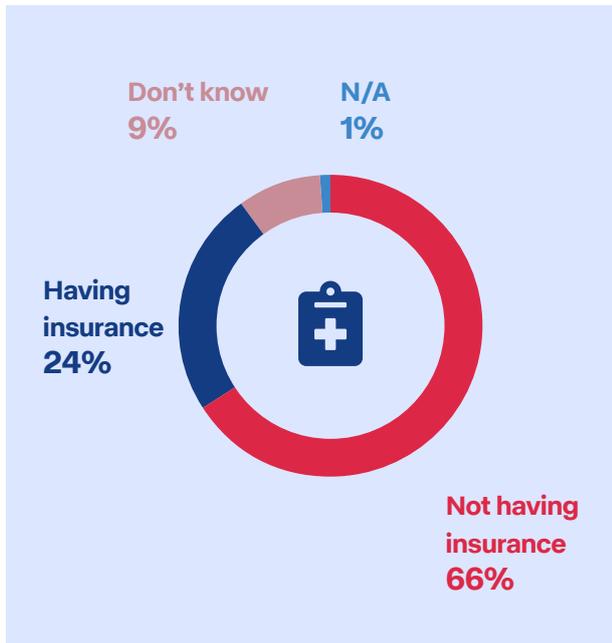
The survey reveals acute **limitations in access to health care** among the target groups, as well as general reluctance among migrants to seek health care in Georgia, citing issues of affordability, mistrust and fears related to legal status or occupation in the case of sex workers. A third (32%) of respondents indicated that they had not visited a medical professional when in need of health care in the past, and 66% do not have health insurance (in addition to further 9% who do not know and can also be assumed to be lacking insurance).

Similar trends have been observed among Georgian population, who share concerns of cost of care, mistrust, and preference for seeking care outside of Georgia with the migrant population⁶. Alarming, findings indicate a **limited awareness of options or right to receive health care** among sampled migrants in Georgia. Of migrants surveyed, 60% were not aware that COVID-19 testing and treatment would be free for them in Georgia in case of experiencing symptoms. All those surveyed were provided with the correct information and latest recommendations issued by the Government of Georgia on prevention and access to health care during the pandemic.) In addition, 17% of the sample experience **language barriers hindering communication with providers** - not being able to understand neither Georgian, nor English. At least one of the two languages is spoken by 83% of surveyed migrants. IOM expects this data to be skewed - despite translating the survey into additional languages, migrants who do not speak English may have nevertheless been less likely to be surveyed. Findings from qualitative elements of the survey and key informant interviews also confirm the possible **unwillingness to come forward for assistance due to fear of arrest and/or stigmatization** - experienced especially by the 8.2% of survey responders who reported irregular immigration status (lack of documents, expired permit or visa, or rejected permit application).

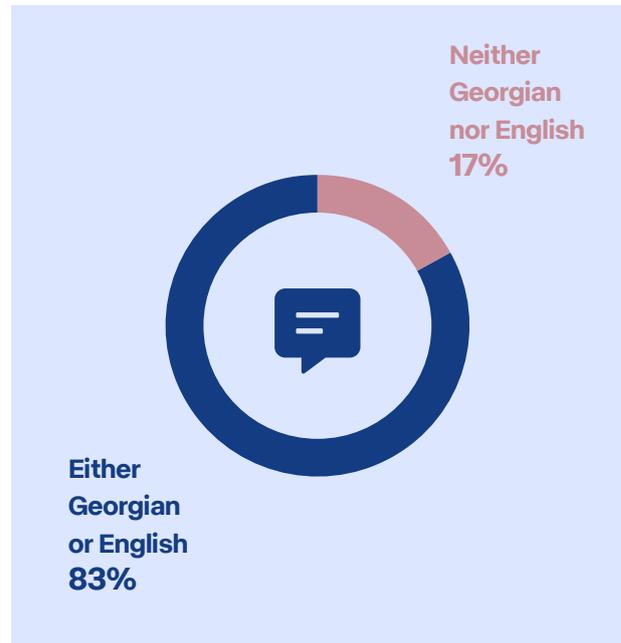
⁵ ibid

⁶ WHO (2018) Quality of primary health care in Georgia

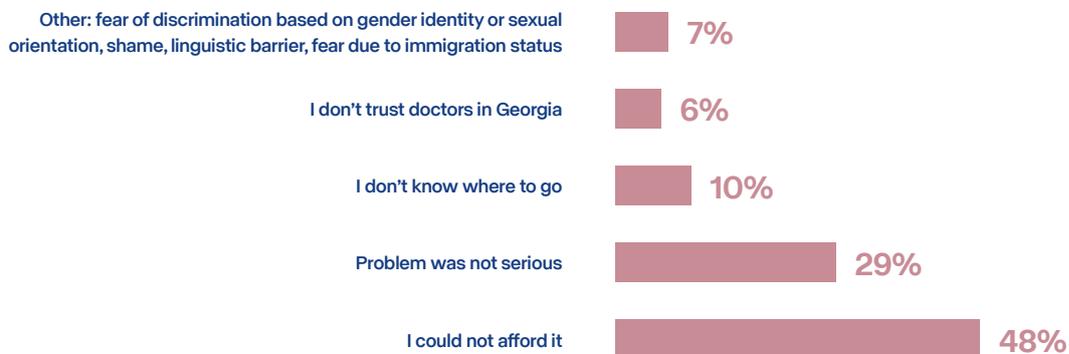
↓ Health insurance coverage among target groups:



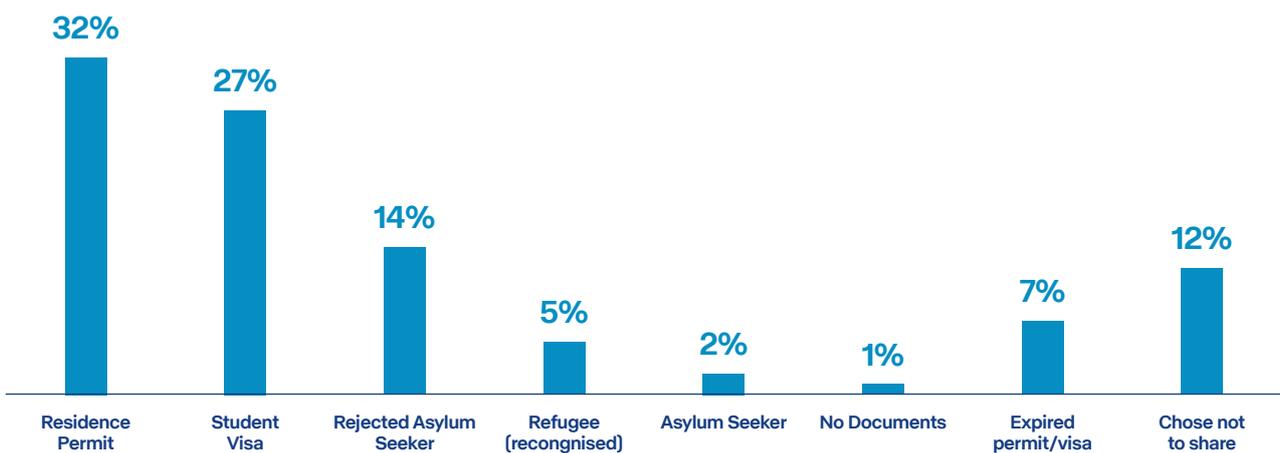
↓ Language barriers among respondents:



↓ Reasoning among those who reported not visiting a doctor when needing health care in the past:

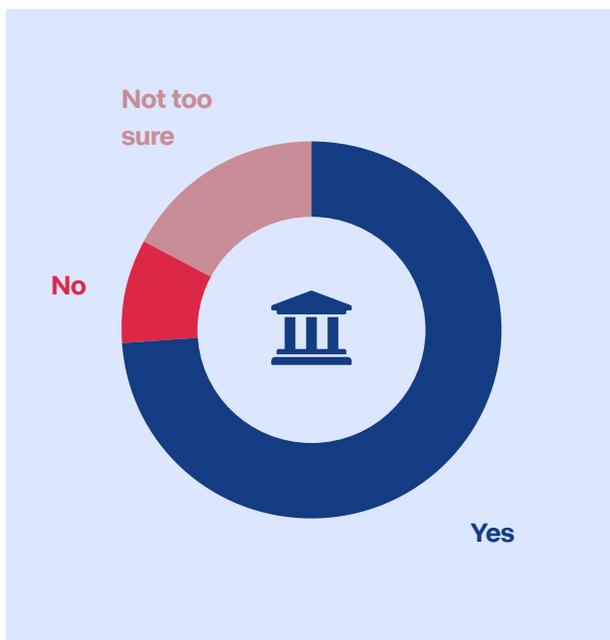


↓ Self-reported legal status:



The assessment confirmed **limited awareness of recommended prevention measures, including due to linguistic barriers** among a significant proportion of the targeted populations. Over a third (35%) of the respondents declared they do not have information about the COVID-19 pandemic and related recommendations, or that they do not have all the information they would like to have. COVID-19 was also most frequently selected by respondents as their “most pressing information need”. Hindering their ability to control the amount of risk and exposure to the epidemic, 42% of respondents reported living in close quarters with people who are not members of their family, sharing bathrooms and kitchens. This reflects the relatively common **inability to respect social distancing in crowded homes** experienced by migrants in Georgia who inhabit low-cost migrant hostels or student residences. Furthermore, 82% of respondents reported **reliance on public transport** which exposes them to added risks of contracting COVID-19, such as taxis, shared car-rides, and public transport. Only 9% of respondents reported owning a car. An analysis of respondents’ occupations highlighted the particular vulnerabilities of specific migrant populations in Georgia to risks associated with **continued exposure in close contact professions**. Among these are health care workers and migrant sex workers (14 surveyed) who continue providing services during the pandemic. Majority of occupations reported by the migrants surveyed, however, do not pose a greater risk of exposure to the pandemic, also given the restrictions on operations in the service, hospitality and tourism industries. Respondents also reported high need for personal protective equipment (PPE) which at the time of data collection was in very short supply in the country. **Limited access to key hygiene items** featured as a second most frequently mentioned need, immediately following the expression of need for financial assistance. **Limited personal protective equipment in the workplace** has not been mentioned by respondents, but can nevertheless be taken into account as a potential vulnerability, especially given the types of professions in which the target groups engage, and the informal nature of their employment (of those who work presently, 78% work informally), which leads to lower rights guarantees and protections in the workplace.

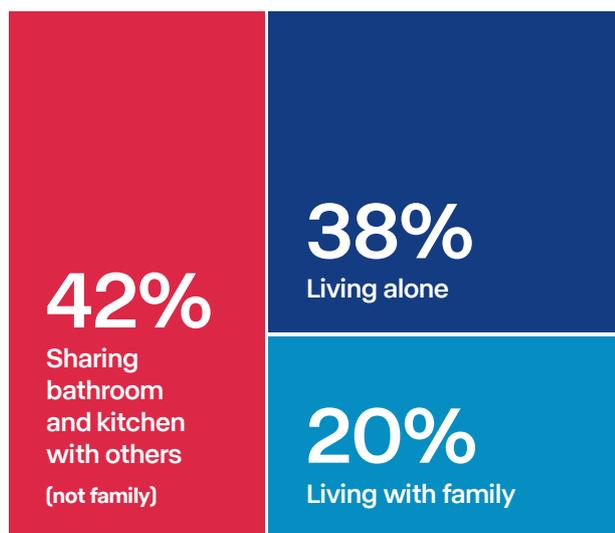
↓ Respondents expressing confidence in understanding COVID-19 related recommendations & instructions by the Government:



↓ Information most frequently identified by respondents as missing:



↓ Responders living situation:



↓ Ranking of needs identified by the respondents

1	Financial assistance (in paying for rent, food etc.)
2	Products of hygiene (gloves, masks, sanitizers)
3	Legal assistance related to legal status/ documentation
4	Medical assistance (for themselves or for family members)
5	Assistance in finding a job
6	Assistance in returning to County of Origin
7	Accessible information about COVID- 19 and situation in Georgia
8	Tuition waiver/ reduction
9	Access to internet

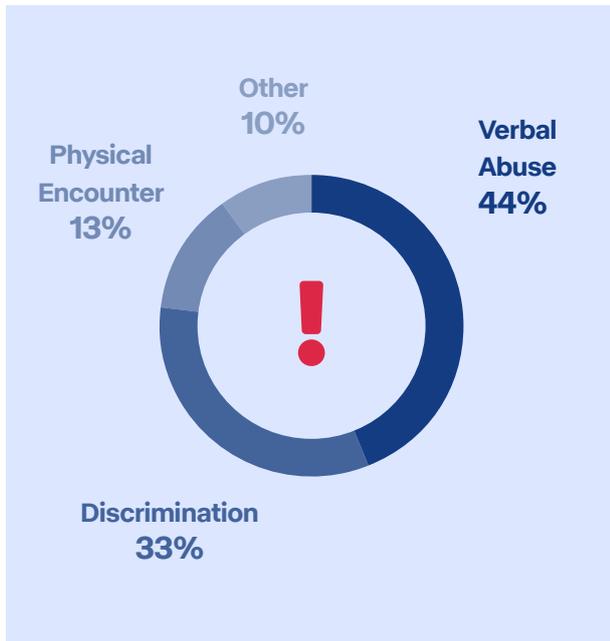
Increased likelihood of suffering psychological impacts of Covid-19: evidence

While potentially effective to contain the risk of infection, site closures, self-isolation protocols and lockdowns can worsen migrants' living conditions and abruptly restrict their ability to move, including their possibilities to access food, basic services and income. Lockdowns and closure of businesses have also translated into obstacles to using public spaces, community centers and private business, upon which migrants often rely for basic services (e.g. communications) and psychological well-being. Barriers preventing migrants' access to long-distance communications options can exacerbate their isolation, hinder their access to information and compound the psychosocial impacts they suffer as a consequence of the crisis.

Migrants surveyed expressed high levels of anxiety resulting from **restrained living and outside space during lockdowns**, with a proportion of respondents self-reporting unwillingness or fear of going outside (though outdoor movement was not prohibited at the moment of data collection) throughout their phone calls with enumerators. In line with government recommendations, migrants keep time spent outside of living quarters to an absolute minimum. For some, friends or hostel managers have facilitated access to food and other essential necessities, enabling full **isolation**. Isolation is compounded by reported **inability to communicate** reported by a smaller sub-set of respondents, who indicated poor access to the internet and limited real-life interactions. The survey noted only limited **anxiety linked with being stranded, potentially arrested or victim of xenophobic acts** - migrants surveyed did not report experiencing hostile behavior related to COVID-19 (such as e.g. xenophobic attacks on Asian migrants at the onset of the pandemic⁷), though 24% reported being victim to unrelated hostile behavior.

⁷ IOM (2020) COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #29: Stigmatization and Discrimination

↓ **Types of hostile behaviour experienced by respondents in Georgia:**



While the psychological impacts of COVID-19 were not explored in detail in IOM's assessment, data collected does indicate that the target groups indeed suffer impacts at least similar to those experienced by the general population in Georgia. Moreover, the impact can only be higher among some migrant groups for whom isolation far away from established social networks, difficulty of communication, navigating a foreign country during an emergency, and economic concerns, generate significant psychosocial distress.

Of those surveyed, 84% reported feeling comfortable staying in Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic, though 32% are considering return to their country of origin, if and when feasible. Of those, only 19% have made specific travel plans, and 35 migrants surveyed expressed wish to receive assistance in returning to their countries of origin (with additional 35 unsure of their need for assistance). These migrants were referred to IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return Programme. Among concerns related to staying in Georgia were primarily economic concerns (50% of respondents) and legal difficulties (35%), but also difficulties related to access to the internet for online education purposes (5%).

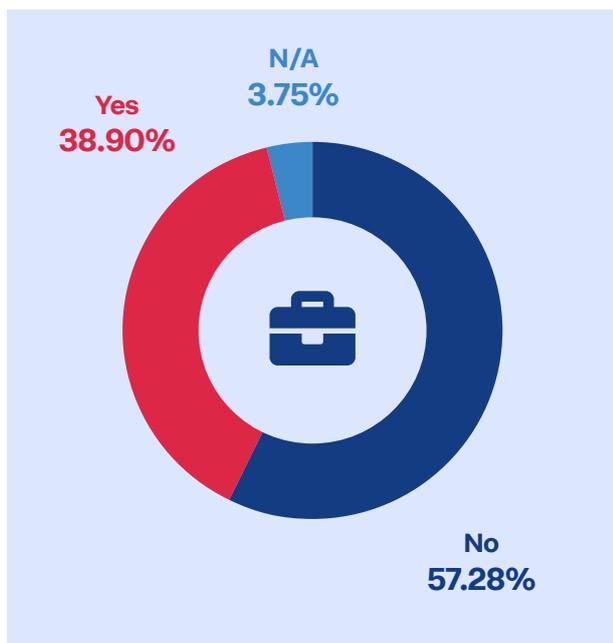
Increased likelihood of livelihood and income insecurity: evidence

IOM's assessment showed that migrants in Georgia are over-represented in some of the industries hardest hit by the crisis, such as hospitality (16.5%) and non-essential retail or domestic work (25%), or in the most precarious positions in any sector (e.g. in the gig economy). Of those presently employed in the sample, 78% held informal jobs (no contract). These unprotected, undeclared positions will represent a substantial share of the thousands of people COVID-19 has pushed and will push towards underemployment and unemployment.

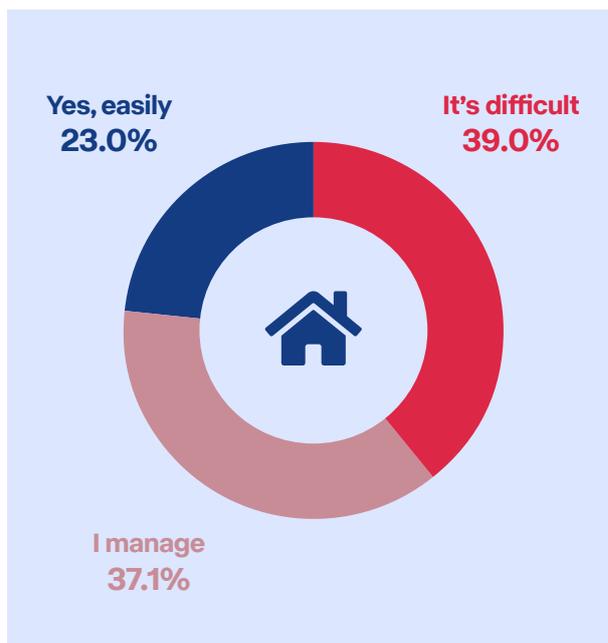
Loss or reduction of employment reflects on abrupt income loss, which, for lower-income households who have limited access to savings, translates into reduced consumption of essential items and products. Of all respondents, 49% are currently unemployed, and 13% are employed. Students, accounting for 38% of the sample, reported relying on temporary jobs to cover living expenses – work which is not available to them at present. This particular subgroup also revealed secondary income effects of COVID-19, limiting the ability of their families in countries of origin to send money to students in Georgia. Alarming, 39% of respondents declared that they or someone within their family has lost work because

of COVID-19. In relation to the pandemic and economic restrictions, migrants surveyed reported alarming difficulties in their ability to afford the cost of life in Georgia. Of those surveyed, 76% struggle to afford rent, and for 75.7% it is not easy to cover general living costs (see detailed breakdown in graphs on next page). Of those who do report having savings, 43% report that the savings would cover living expenses of 3 months or less.

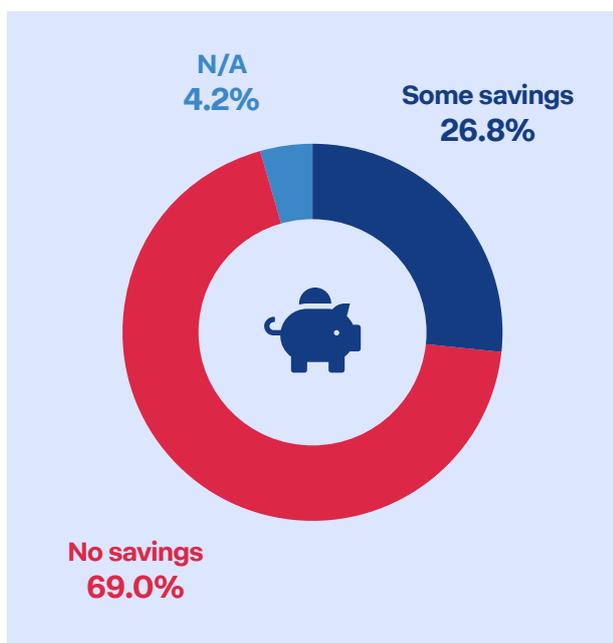
↓ Have you or anyone in your family lost work due to COVID-19?



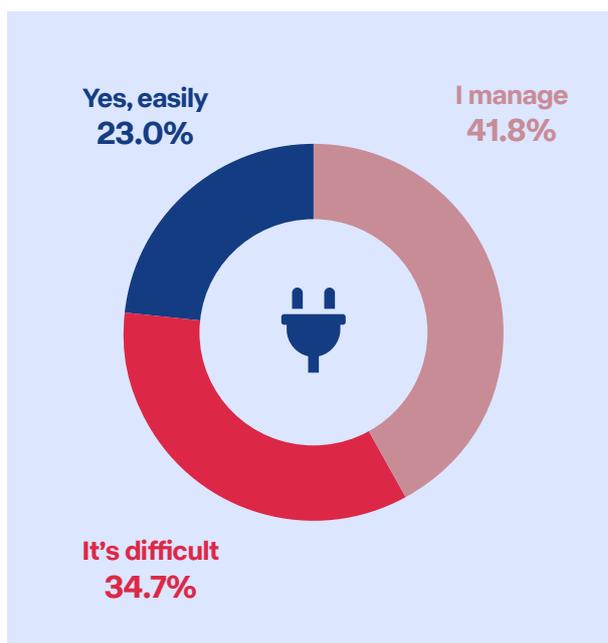
↓ Are you able to pay your rent?



↓ Do you have any savings?



↓ Are you able to pay for your living costs?



↓ **How many months could you live without income, from your savings?**

Up to 3 months	47.37%
3-6 months	8.77%
6-12 months	7.02%
12-24 months	10.53%
Not Specified	26.32%

↓ **Types of needed legal assistance**

Legal status and residency documents	29
Understanding/realization of their rights as foreigners	9
Divorce	2
Health Insurance	2

Discontinued provision of basic assistance and integration services could be of concern to those reliant on such support systems, however, with the exception of recognized asylum seekers (not targeted by this assessment), migrants surveyed have not reported such interruptions – likely due to the general low availability of migrant-specific support in Georgia. **Lack of inclusion in COVID-19 income support schemes, housing provision programmes or rental subsidies/exemptions** may further impact migrants' livelihood and income insecurity in Georgia.

Income insecurity is also related to the **real or perceived inability to maintain regular migration status** as recorded by the survey via questions relating to the need for legal assistance. While the Government of Georgia's decree issued on April 16 grants foreigners who were legally on the territory of Georgia on March 14, 2020 a right to stay in the country until June 30, 2020, those who do not have sufficient information or are in an irregular situation Georgia (8.2% of respondents) have reported significant insecurity and distress related to their immigration status. Need for legal assistance in matters related to residence and legal status was expressed by 13% of the migrants surveyed, including respondents experiencing severe distress related to securing/maintaining legal documents and status during the current crisis.

This report was published by IOM-UN Migration Agency, Mission to Georgia in April 2020, within the framework of the project “Enhancing Migrants’ Rights and Good Governance in Armenia and Georgia – EMERGE”, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Similar assessment is currently conducted in Armenia under supervision of the IOM Mission in Armenia.

EMERGE

The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the report do not imply expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in the meeting of operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

This publication has been issued without formal editing by IOM.

Data collection was organized with the support of Georgian CSOs Green Caucasus, Migration Center, Rights Georgia and Tanadgoma.