

Global Migration Challenges Speaker Series

The Global Migration Challenges series offers accessible, policy-focused conversations with leading experts, civil society, and practitioners. The series is presented with support from Immigration, Refugees, & Citizenship Canada, and the Canada Research Chair in Global Migration.

This report was prepared by students from the Lab's Graduate Student Research Initiative. For more information please email: migration.munkschool@utoronto.ca.

Report 6

Defining and Trending Sanctuary Cities

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Participants:

Alexandra D. Alonso: “The Limits and Possibilities of Sanctuary: Modes of Resistance and Solidarity in the Trump Era”

Idil Atak: “Toronto’s Sanctuary City Policy: Rationale and Barriers”

Ritika Goel: “No Sanctuary Without Health: Uninsured in Canada”

Discussant:

Chris Brillinger: Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration at City of Toronto

Issue

The theme topic of this discussion is “Defining and Trending Sanctuary Cities”. Professor Idil Atak spoke on the shifting of Toronto’s Sanctuary City policies, and she particularly focused on how Toronto sought to build an inclusive social environment to undocumented immigrants. Professor Alexandra Delano Alonso, on the other hand, focused on the challenges of protecting undocumented immigrants in the Trump Era, and she also spoke about the new movements and initiatives that serve to protect undocumented immigrants from the increasingly harsh government’s policies. Dr. Ritika Goel, who is a specialist in the field of healthcare studies, provided a detail analysis of the failure of Canadian healthcare system in protecting such groups as

undocumented immigrants. Dr. Goel also proposed some new policy options to deal with such failure and weakness of Canada's healthcare system.

Discussion Summary

In her speech "Toronto's Sanctuary City Policy: Rationales and Barriers", Professor Atak started with looking into the shifts of Toronto's Sanctuary City Policies over time. She reviewed that the earliest sanctuary city policies were adopted in 2006 and were entitled "Access without Fear" motion. This motion was supposed to make the City of Toronto safer for residents including undocumented immigrants, particularly by restoring the trust of residents on police forces; preventing victimization; and addressing crimes more effectively. Then in 2010, a new set of sanctuary city policies, also known as "Access T.O.", were adopted. These new policies particularly focused on making the City services in Toronto, including library and other services, more inclusive to undocumented immigrants – so that the overall environment in Toronto would be safer and more compassionate to these immigrants. As will be demonstrated later, Professor Atak also pointed out a number of barriers that prevent Access T.O. from achieving its mandate of improving the inclusiveness of city services, and what could be done to overcome these barriers.

While Professor Atak focuses on the sanctuary city policy of Toronto, Professor Alonso and her speech "The Limits and Possibilities of Sanctuary: Modes of Resistance and Solidarity in the Trump Era" provided detailed explanation of the "Sanctuary City" movements in the U.S. Professor Alonso started with reviewing years of the Federal government's efforts in tracking and pursuing undocumented immigrants in the Bush and Obama Era, and indicating how such efforts heightened to a brand new level under the Trump's Administration. She even described under Trump's rule, even in cities that claim themselves as "Sanctuary City" (such as New York), there are still incidents where police forces and immigration officers break into private space and violently arrest the suspected undocumented immigrants. As will be demonstrated later, she further took note of the rise of "New Sanctuary Coalitions" and other sanctuary city initiatives that serve to protect undocumented immigrants from the increasingly harsh immigration and asylum policies of the U.S.

Last, but not least, Dr. Ritika Goel focused on another aspect regarding the weakness of undocumented immigrants – that is, the lack of insurance from health plan coverage. In her speech "No Sanctuary without Health: Defining and Defending Sanctuary Cities", she walked us through how Canada's healthcare system – which has been famous for universal and adequate healthcare for Canadian citizens and permanent residents – has been largely discriminatory towards groups such as undocumented people, temporary workers, international students who switching between visas, and even returning

citizens. According to Dr. Goel, in cases of getting ill, these discriminated and uninsured groups are mostly denied access to public health clinics, community health centers and emergency rooms. Consequently, as compared to those who are insured, these discriminated people have 43% higher possibility of getting severely ill. As will be demonstrated later, with regard to such concerning issue, Dr. Goel discussed and introduced some of the policy options that are currently underway – or could be taken – to better protect the discriminated groups.

Lessons Learned

During Professor Atak's segment on "Toronto's Sanctuary City Policy" discussion, she outlined the main barriers that prevent Access T.O. from achieving its mandate of improving customer service to Toronto's vulnerable population, namely undocumented Torontonians. These barriers include a lack of proper city funding, lack of dedicated staff, a limited amount of training and awareness-raising, and, perhaps most importantly, the City of Toronto's lack of dialogue with the provincial and federal governments. Essentially, there is a real issue regarding services and undocumented migrants because, as far as the federal level of concerned, undocumented migrants are invisible. From a political perspective, there simply isn't enough data on this demographic to warrant endorsing and supporting programs tailored towards undocumented migrants. As seen from the barriers above, there is a lack of proper infrastructure to provide services to undocumented Torontonians. "We need permanent solutions as opposed to band-aid solutions here in Toronto" argued Professor Idak. In order to transform Toronto into a proper sanctuary city, a variety of solutions are required. First, we could adapt a "Wal-mart model" with regards to city-funded services. By building a real network to create a one-stop shop for services access, undocumented Torontonians would be better able to navigate the bureaucracy impeding them from accessing essential services. Another solution to addressing the multiple barriers surrounding this issue is to run a public education campaign that would aim to change the negative public perception around undocumented migrants. Additionally, this education campaign would also have to be targeted towards the migrants themselves in order to address potential fear or distrust they may have about using services. Another way of changing negative public perception would be to depoliticize and decriminalize undocumented migration. Finally, in order to better advise future public policy around this issue and secure more federal funding, it is imperative that more comparative research on undocumented migrants in cities be conducted.

In his segment on "The Limits and Possibilities of Sanctuary," Professor Alonso focused more on the upcoming and current effects of Trump's regime on sanctuary cities in the United States. Recently, there have been a variety of new initiatives to redefine what "sanctuary" means and redefine the scope of protection and including undocumented

immigrants in host societies. A project in Philadelphia, for instance, is aiming to redefine and expand sanctuary beyond providing legal protection and not cooperating with the federal immigration officers” to “creating inclusive and safe social services and public space for LGBTQ, undocumented immigrants and other marginalized groups.” It is becoming increasingly important to replace “sanctuary” with “freedom cities” which aim to focus on community building and creating environments free of physical and economic violence. The main takeaway from this discussion is that engagement with undocumented migrants is an essential pillar for building havens where this demographic can feel safe and contribute in a meaningful way to their communities.

During Dr. Goel’s segment on “No sanctuary without health: defining and defending sanctuary cities,” she shared stories of some of her patient’s experiences of dealing with the health care system. There has been a steady increase in the percentage of uninsured hospital visits since 2002, and currently there are approximately 500, 000 uninsured people in Ontario. Studies have found that uninsured people are more likely to leave untreated and are more likely to die. Unfortunately, Canada seems to be very behind with regards to providing health services to undocumented migrants. In the EU, for instance, they will at least provide emergency services to undocumented migrants. Change is desperately needed in Canada in order to address this increasingly worsening issue. A potential policy option could be to extend federal coverage for uninsured residents through the existing Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). The IFHP provides limited, temporary coverage of health care benefits to people who aren’t eligible for provincial or territorial health insurance, such as protected persons and refugee claimants. Currently, the IFHP does not cover the cost of health-care services that people can ordinarily claim under public or private health insurance plans. Additionally, the IFHP does not coordinate benefits with other insurance plans or programs so co-payments are not possible. While IFHP constitutes a good starting point, much more can be done to improve health care services to undocumented migrants in Canada. Another policy option is the movement advocating OHIP for all, launched in 2016. This initiative successfully made it on to the Ontario NDP platform during the provincial elections but was not moved forward when the party lost. However, this particular initiative, which sought to offer services through over 80 allied organizations, would be an ideal policy option for ensuring that nobody is left behind when it comes to access to good and affordable health care, regardless of the social and legal status.

In conclusion, there are many improvements to be made regarding access to services for undocumented migrants, both on a national and provincial scale in Canada. Various policy options have been discussed, but it is hard to walk the fine line between offering good, affordable services to undocumented migrants without triggering federal level investigations from the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA). For instance,

identification cards for undocumented migrants in Toronto were being seriously considered for a while, but since they could not be assured by the would-be card issuers that the personal information of the registrants would never find its way to the CBSA, Chris Brillinger advised against it. There are many other potential solutions, but the key to solving the issue lies with the governments. In order for any type of progress to be made, it is critical that there be more productive intergovernmental dialogues on undocumented migrants.