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Protective measures, but for whom?

Here I was, standing in front of a monastery – the embodiment of abstinence and withdrawal from society, a place of separation from life outside the walls. How fitting, then, that my potential respondents would be situated in this fortress.

In September 2020, in midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I embarked a research project that examines the impact of the pandemic on Polish and Romanian workers employed in the meat industry and distribution warehouses. These are professions that were labelled as ‘essential’ during the pandemic. Moreover, these are professions that are largely performed by a migrant labour force. With a target group commonly defined by researchers and policy-makers as being ‘difficult to reach’, we knew that looking for respondents would be challenging. However, in times of an ongoing pandemic, an aggravating element was added to this empirical data collection.

For one thing, in accordance with the applicable national Covid-19 regulations, we could not start with a physical quest for respondents for nearly half of our scheduled fieldwork period. With the government urgently advising not to travel, a ban of being outside with more than two people and the maximum admission of only two guests per household per day, we were forced to experiment with alternative ways.

We therefore set out ads and posts on Facebook, scanned through online community groups and forums, repeatedly encouraging workers to register through a short form. However, such approach turned out to be only partially successful. Understandable, if the target group are mostly people who not only have never before been involved with academics, but who also generally live and

work rather isolated from the rest of the local society. For the crucial trust-building thus, a personal contact, instead of a digital appeal, was dearly needed.

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However, only once it was considered ‘safe enough’ to enter the field physically, we were able to visit housing locations and working places, and to connect with people, even when on a ‘social distance’. Finally, we could observe with our own eyes how many EU migrant workers live and how they travel to work. It is not uncommon for them to live in huge shared accommodations, such as hotels or former monasteries. So here I was, ready to ask the people on the other side of the wall, what the corona measures mean for them. As the fieldwork progressed, however, an additional question rose in my mind: What does it mean to conduct a research on these workers that expose themselves to health risks on a daily basis (by performing ongoing physical work, living in big shared accommodations, commuting with a crowded means of transport), but at the same time protecting myself and only visit them once the state measures allow it, thus when I am safe enough?

To me, ultimately, this is yet another indication that while protective corona measures and regulations have reached me, they failed to adequately address this group of workers. Nevertheless, the dilemma of wanting to study the experiences of a vulnerable group of workers, whilst guarding my own safety, will remain worth reflecting on in the further process of this research.

In 2021 worden de columns geschreven door promovendi en onlangs gepromoveerden in het migratierecht.