

Revealing the New Type of Urban Displaced People through the Lens of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Neglected Vulnerable Groups during Lockdown

Ali Cheshmehzangi^{1,2*}, Tong Zou²

¹ Network for Education and Research on Peace and Sustainability (NERPS), Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan

² Faculty of Science and Technology, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Zhejiang, China

Abstract

In China, there are no homeless people or displaced people on the streets as the government has made great efforts to rehabilitate them in hospices since 2003. This process is part of implementing the National Standards and Measures for Rescuing Urban Vagrants, Beggars, and Displaced People. However, due to the siphoning effect of megacities, people from less developed and/or rural areas are attracted to look for jobs and new opportunities in urban areas. In this process, they become temporary residents as migrant workers or known as the floating population of cities. Living in the “village-in-cities” or “ViCs” and/or group-oriented leasing from sub-landlords have become their only choice due to low earnings and high rental costs. Such living conditions lead to further challenges and implications, such as lack of access to some primary services. During the COVID-19 pandemic and at the time of lockdowns imposed in some cities, temporary residents of larger cities faced difficulties in receiving the support that was needed for all urban residents. Their temporary urban resident status means they have limitations compared to the regular urban residents. This study explores a case study and reflects on the challenges faced by the new type of urban displaced people through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight the vulnerability of such populations with multiple impacts on their jobs, social life, access, receiving services, and mobility.


Keywords: Urban displaced people, Vulnerable groups, Lockdown, COVID-19, Cities, Pandemic

1. Introduction

In the context of China’s COVID-zero policy, many people are forced into home isolation or on-spot quarantine by the strict pandemic control and prevention regulations during the pandemic outbreak. Since January 2022 and the reoccurrence of smaller outbreaks across the country, many Chinese cities have implemented stringent lockdown measures. Some of these lockdown cases were imposed as city-wide temporary closures, with the case of Shanghai being the most severe case of all, with almost two months of continuous lockdown. On-spot quarantines may trap people in unfamiliar places with

uncertainties and risks. For instance, some truckers are trapped on the highway. Workers are trapped at construction sites, factories, etc., making them temporally displaced. Even though migrant workers trapped by home isolations are living in a relatively familiar place, they also face similar situations to on-spot quarantined people, including facing unemployment risks, reduced incomes, unstable food supply, limited access to medical supports, mental stresses, and lack of information sources that are useful, reliable, efficient and sufficient to support and help them overcome those challenges and issues

*Corresponding Author:

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2657-4865>

e-mail address: ali.cheshmehzangi@nottingham.edu.cn, tong.zou@nottingham.edu.cn

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caused and/or amplified by the sudden quarantine and lockdown. In this study, we consider those people as a ‘new type of urban displaced people’ during the unique era of the COVID-19 pandemic, linking their vulnerability to the limitations and eventual barriers with a focus on lockdown measures and governmental policy enforcement.

This study employs a survey to identify the significant challenges introduced and/or elevated by multiple barriers among these new urban displaced people during the quarantine. In particular, we study the digital divide barriers that cause further disruptions and disparities among such populations. We also evaluate the impacts of lockdown on floating populations’ jobs/income, social life, access, services, and mobility.

2. Background Information about the conditions of ViCs in China

Many cities in China still include poorer communities that are remained as the recent-old areas, often known as “village-in-cities” or “ViCs”. Dense urban fabrics often characterize these areas in the form of older communities during the mass housing development period of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. ViCs are usually home to new incomers or rural-to-urban migrants from surrounding villages or elsewhere (Gálvez and Cheshmehzangi, 2015). In most cases, such new urban migrants cannot afford high rental fees in cities and become temporary residents of ViCs (Zeng et al., 2019). They may share rooms or apartments in mid-rise building blocks in areas where public spaces are limited, and street networks are narrow. These areas are formalized living areas, and they have been disappearing quickly in the recent two decades (Cheshmehzangi et al., 2021; O’Donnell, 2021). Due to their economic status, larger cities like Shenzhen and Shanghai have many urban communities or villages (Li and Zhu, 2014; Liu et al.,

2018a; Liu et al., 2018b). In a relatively new city like Shenzhen, ViCs remain a sort of urban characteristic where new urban migrants find their first home to settle in their new urban life.

We can argue that ViCs are the remaining parts of the rapid urban modernization process that took place in many Chinese cities. Cities like Shenzhen still kept some of these communities due to the high demand for labor-intensive businesses. The urban migrants usually have low skills, poor education background and often are labors in nearby areas and businesses, such as in construction or development sites, retail and commercial units, hospitals, restaurants, etc. They do not bring along high-level skills and have to adapt to their new living conditions. The Chinese resident system, called HuKou, is linked to where people are from and legally work. However, most people in the floating populations in larger cities do not have the urban resident status; and hence, are considered temporary residents with limited or no access to certain services.

Our studies note that floating populations of larger cities face tangible limitations and difficulties, particularly during the lockdown periods. In spring 2022, the City of Shenzhen faced a short-term reoccurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to higher mobility across borders between Hong Kong and Mainland China. The upsurge in the number of infected cases led to the eventual city-level lockdown measures, which lasted for one week. The lockdown meant the closure of businesses and public activities/events, with regular health and monitory checks, mass testing, and closure of communities. This approach also meant the closure of ViCs at their primary and secondary gates and not permitting people to go in and out of residential compounds. The new urban migrants were displaced due to a lack of access to their daily jobs and income. More importantly, they had limitations in

receiving regular support and services, such as food supply, medical care, etc. Limited accessibility to such essential services meant the local government and community managers had to act more promptly in providing food supply, medical support, health checks, and regular testing. Such floating populations were cut-off from their daily jobs and had no access to social services. Due to their conditional residential status, we identify them as the new type of urban displaced people. This study aims to highlight key aspects and concerns related to their living conditions in larger cities. In particular, we use the lockdown period to shed light on barriers, limitations, and difficulties faced by the floating population of larger cities.

3. Methodology and Case Study Research

To better evaluate the conditions of typical ViCs in China, we conducted an empirical research analysis, using both a questionnaire survey and mapping of one case study example. Due to accessibility limitations, this study could not benefit from multiple case studies in different cities. Thus, the study is based on the

survey of one of the popular ViCs in the City of Shenzhen, in Guangdong Province, South of China. The selected case of this paper is located in the Futian District, which is the city's central financial district. As it stands, the district only has one ViC remaining under its jurisdiction. Elsewhere in the city, such communities are usually surrounded by high-rise towers of financial buildings, hotels, and commercial/retail development. The selected site is a large dense community located on the eastern side of Futian District, called Gangxia Village. Like the other ViCs in Shenzhen, Gangxia Village is home to new rural-to-urban migrants and is subject to future demolition. As the last standing ViC in Futian District, there are major debates about whether the community will be sustained in the near future. On three sides, east, west, and south, Gangxia Village is surrounded by high-rise residential buildings with commercial podiums. On the north side, there is a linear commercial compound (facing Shennan Boulevard), which includes hotels, offices, commercial and retail units, etc. In the middle of this 1.5km long urban block are the mid-rise residential buildings of Gangxia Village (see Figures 1 and 2).

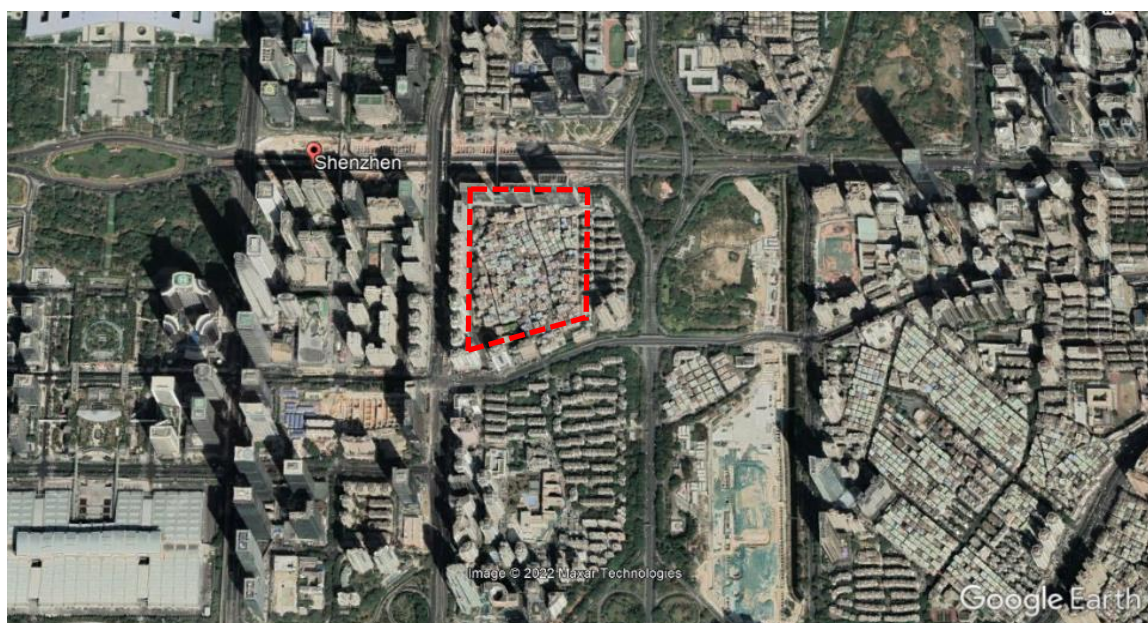


Figure 1. Aerial image of Gangxia Village in the context of Futian District in Shenzhen (Source: map is extracted from Google Earth, image © 2022 Maxar Technologies)

Note: Red dashed line is the total area of Gangxia Village



Figure 2. Bird view of Gangxia Village from North commercial side, showing the mid-rise residential towers in a densely-populated urban area (Source: The Authors).

Gangxia Village is a typical village community dominated by a floating population. According to Southern Newspapers Press Plus (2020), the total population of Gangxia village is about 60,000, of whom only 8,000 people registered permanent local residences in Shenzhen. As the only urban village in the Futian Central District of Shenzhen and a crucial part of Shenzhen's central axis, Gangxia village has been attracting many migrating/floating people who come to Shenzhen to seek a livelihood due to its prominent location, convenient transportation, and relatively low rent. With years of rapid speedy development of Shenzhen, this village has made some demolitions and reconstructions to upgrade its old settings and built environments. Nowadays, there is parlance to describe the current landscape of Gangxia regarding its split pattern: *"one side is heaven, the other side is hell"*.

Before demolition and reconstruction, it used to have the west and east villages, or the Heyuan Area and Louyuan Area (Tan & Shima, 2017; Shenzhen Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources (SMBPNR), 2020). Most of their buildings, infrastructures, and landscapes are old, dense, messy, and highly populated. This is a lack of planning and management in the community. There are reports of increasing potential safety hazards, fire risks, and incidences of public health issues. To provide supporting functions and delivery services for financial, business, cultural, and other industries in Shenzhen, Heyuan Area has been developed as the core area of Shenzhen Central Business District (CBD) after the municipal government established a policy named *"On the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone of rural urbanization of the Interim Provisions"* in 1992 (Tan & Shima, 2017). Meanwhile, the status of the Louyuan area remains the same.

However, the history of this village can be traced back to almost 700 years ago, during the Southern Song Dynasty. It is recorded that the original local villagers are all descendants of Wen Tianxiang who was a Chinese poet, politician, and national hero who fought against Kulai Khan's invasion during the war to resist the Yuan Dynasty and save the Song Dynasty from 1275 to 1283 (SMBPNR, 2020; Baidubaike, n.d.). Regarding this historical and cultural background, humanistic inheritance has been adopted as the key planning philosophy of Gangxia Village. It is also one of the 15 villages joining the Urban Village Reconstruction and Revitalization Project in 2004. The main projects are still in Heyuan Area, covering about 230,000 square meters (SMBPNR, 2020). After completion, it will provide approximately 265,900 square meters for residences, 585,400 square meters for commercial and service industries, and 25,500 square meters for public facilities. In the memory of Gangxia Village's ancestor, Wen Tianxiang, this project built the Wentian Xiang Primary School, and now it is in use, while the Memorial Hall of Wentian Xiang will be opened to the public in late 2022 (SMBPNR, 2020).

4. Research Design

The study is conducted through the distribution of questionnaires in Gangxia Village, Shenzhen. The survey was done weeks after Shenzhen experienced a week-long city-wide lockdown. During that period, the Gangxia village/community was also closed, and its residents could not go in and out of the community. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire survey had 120 respondents in three days of on-site surveys, which were done in early June 2022. The Likert Scale is developed by Rensis Likert in 1932 to measure attitudes, opinions, attitudes or behaviors (Likert, 1932; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). A typical Likert scale are a 5- or 7-point ordinal scale

including a series of 5 or 7 statements for respondents to choose the most suitable corresponds fits their feelings about the statement or question (Sullivan & Artino, 2013; Bhanadari & Nikolopoulou, 2020). According to Bhanadari & Nikolopoulou (2020), "*Likert scales are most useful when you are missing unobservable individual characteristics, or characteristics that have no concrete, objective measurements*". This method suits our research background perfectly. Since our respondents are general residents from the study area, 5-point scales would be much simpler for them to understand and choose the answers. The simpler the questions are, the higher the willingness of people to participate. Also, it saves much more time than a 7-point scales.

All 120 participants are part of the floating population of Gangxia Village. The research team also mapped access points, safety checks, and accessibility measures at the community level. Mapping results were utilised to identify mobility patterns in and out of the community, as well as within the community. In the following section, we provide results and discussions of this survey. The survey focuses on issues related to vulnerable floating populations in cities and reveals that they are the new type of urban displaced people due to the ongoing pandemic. This group is considered displaced people mainly due to a range of limitations, barriers, and challenges they faced during the lockdown period.

To extract useful information from the questionnaire survey, a content analysis was utilized as a qualitative method to process the key information as well and identify meaningful implications of the results. The results of questionnaire were coded into six different categories, including the issues of digital divide barriers, jobs and/or incomes, social life, access to food & supplies, receiving services, and mobility (see Figure 3).

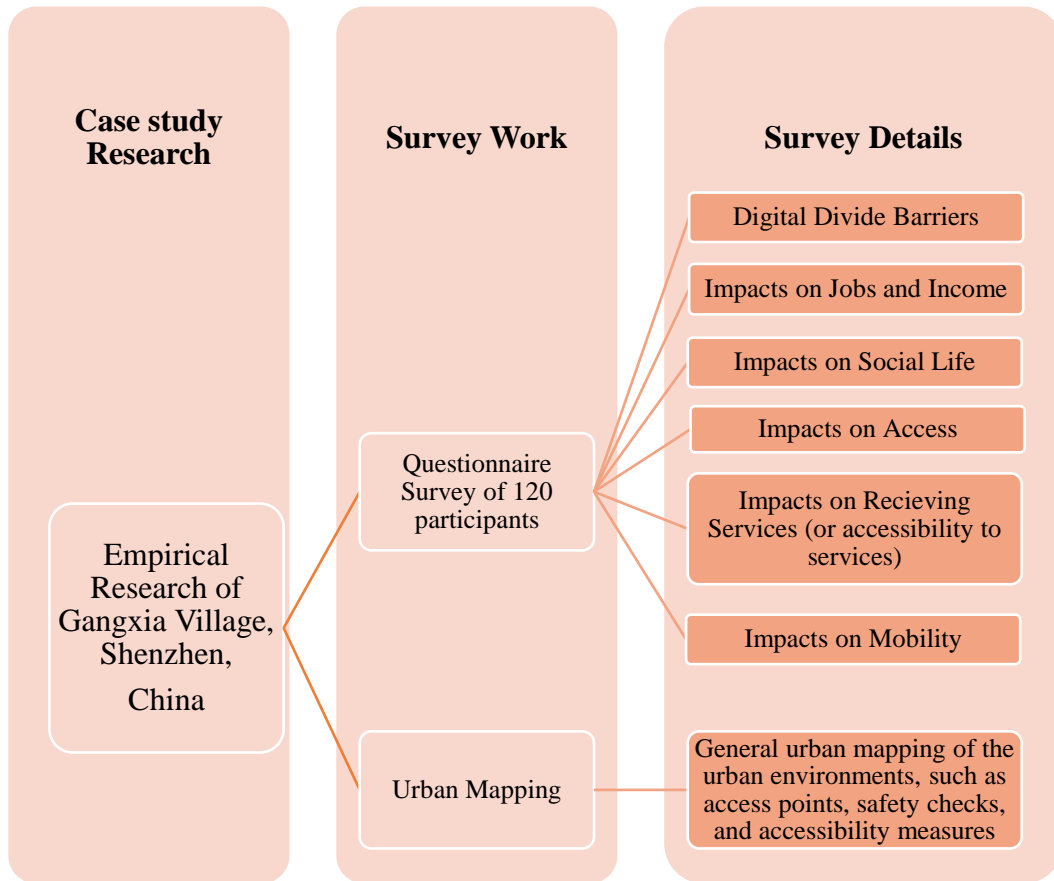


Figure 3. The overall research structure and methods

5. Results and Discussion

The survey of 120 participants focused on six questions as shown below:

(Q1) In compared to residents of the city, the earlier lockdown of one week affected my job and household income.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(Q2) In compared to residents of the city, the earlier lockdown of one week affected my social life and activities.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(Q3) In compared to residents of the city, the earlier lockdown of one week affected my access to food and supplies.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(Q4) In compared to residents of the city, the earlier lockdown of one week constrained me from receiving services, such as social services, healthcare services, etc.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(Q5) In compared to residents of the city, the earlier lockdown of one week restricted my regular mobility in and out of the community for commuting and other purposes.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(Q6) In compared to residents of the city, my access to digital platforms and support were limited during the one week lockdown.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The data was collected based on the Likert Scale analysis in five evaluative response levels of strongly agree, agree, neutral,

disagree, and strongly disagree. The questions were asked in the form of comparison with other residents elsewhere

in Shenzhen, i.e., outside the ViCs like Gangxia Village. The findings show a high proportion of strong agreement related to impacts on ‘jobs/income’ and ‘receiving services’, a high proportion of agreement related to impacts on ‘digital divide issues’,

a high proportion of neutral responses related to ‘access to food and supplies’, and ‘social life’, and a high proportion of disagree response related to impacts on ‘mobility’. The results are summarised in Figure 4 below.

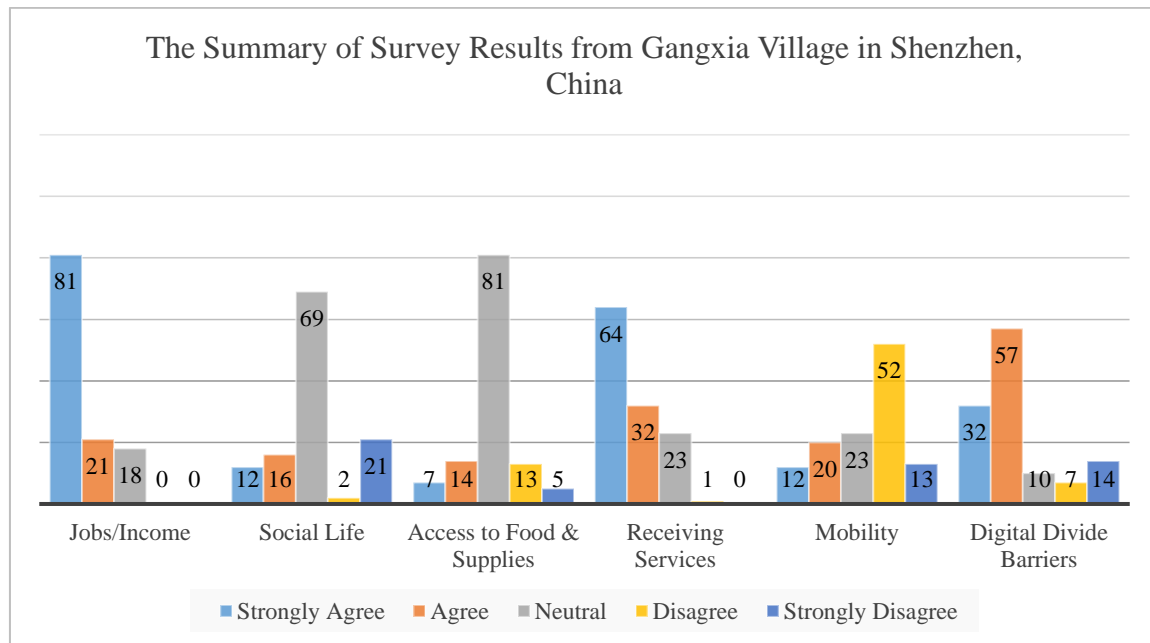


Figure 4. Summary of survey results based on six questions from 120 participants, conducted after the city-wide lockdown period imposed in Shenzhen

The findings indicate that the floating populations of areas like Gangxia village are considered displaced urban populations, particularly during the lockdown periods and other similar times when access points are restricted, and safety measures are imposed. In comparison to local registered residents in the city, floating populations are largely affected due to a lack of access to secured jobs and services. The survey results reflect these major barriers and challenges. While the impacts on social life and access to food and supplies are similar to registered residents, the survey reveals other issues related to the urban living conditions of ViCs. These include limited access to green spaces and public places and the lack of such spaces within such communities. While such communities have a relatively rich social life, the social activities are usually within the boundaries of ViCs. Other factors like mobility and accessibility were restricted across the city, and hence,

the results indicate how people’s day-to-day commuting was affected. It is noted that those working nearby or within the community are affected the least, but with the closure of businesses, the impacts on mobility become tangible across the city. Access to necessary social services and healthcare services remains a significant challenge for such floating populations. Such limitations require further attention by the community managers and local governments, allowing them to find smooth solutions to provide necessary support and essential services to such vulnerable groups. In sum, although short-term, the recent lockdown period in Shenzhen had major economic and social implications on non-registered populations. Hence, we open up the argument that such vulnerable groups are the urban displaced people, and we urge the local governments to find ways of supporting them during hardships and beyond.

6. Conclusion

While ViCs have already suffered from branding projects (Fan, 2014), places like Gagxia village survive with an informal economy and micro-level living activities (Pets, 2016). The imposed lockdown measures make the floating populations more vulnerable due to limited or no access to essential services. Issues such as job insecurity and living in highly-dense populated areas also lead to other social disparities that require further attention through policy-making and governmental interventions. In many places globally, and through the process of economic growth, such floating populations exist. This is an inevitable fact. Hence, policies and planning strategies could explore ways of responding to local community demands and responding to existing barriers and challenges that make the vulnerable more

vulnerable. This study briefly highlights growing issues such as digital divide barriers and lack of access to services, which could be resolved if the floating populations are not neglected. We trust that future plans could be more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the current situations. Such approaches could ensure ViCs are not typical informal settlements and their residents are not neglected or displaced. Community-building processes of ViCs should be bottom-up processes, putting people at heart. Future steps should help strategize ways of enhancing urban living, social life, job opportunities, accessibility, and equity in ViCs and similar vulnerable urban communities. In any circumstances, such vulnerable groups should not be displaced.

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