No going back: COVID-19 disease threat perceptions and male migrants' willingness to return to work in India

Background

Migration is a **short-term coping strategy** for nearly **139 million migrants** in India, who also lack a formal safety net or insurance.
COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions triggered a humanitarian crisis, causing:
(a) Reverse migration (Karim et al., 2020); **and (b) wage deflation and surplus labor** in rural India (Mahendra Dev & Sengupta, 2020; Dandekar & Ghai, 2020)

Methodology

N=495
Adult male migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Bihar.

TELEPHONIC SURVEY
Incentivized with INR 100 phone recharge in May 2020, via recruitment partners in local languages.

Survey components
Sociodemographics (age, religion, caste)

Migration
Duration of migration (<5m, 5-10m, >10m), whether or not migrants will return to city for work
COVID-19
Chance of contracting (no, some, high); information sources, preventive behaviours

Behaviorual factors
Loss aversion, time preferences, subjective well-being, using survey measures

Econometric framework:
Use a linear probability model (LPM) to explain likelihood of willingness to return to the city as a function of perceived disease threat of COVID-19:

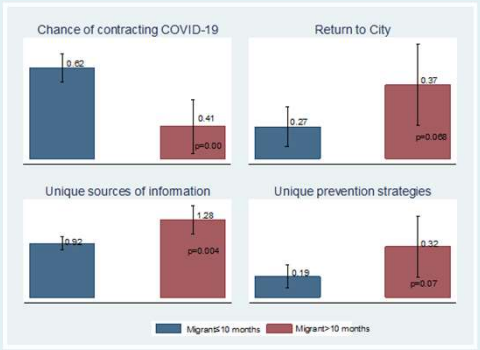
$$Return_{ihs} = \alpha + \beta_1 Duration_{ihs} \times \widehat{COVID}_{ihs} + \beta_2 Beh_{ihs} + \beta_3 X_{ihs} + \eta_{ihs} \quad (1)$$
$$COVID_{ihs} = \gamma + \delta_1 Cor_{ihs} + \delta_2 Beh'_{ihs} + \delta_3 X'_{ihs} + \epsilon_{ihs} \quad (2)$$

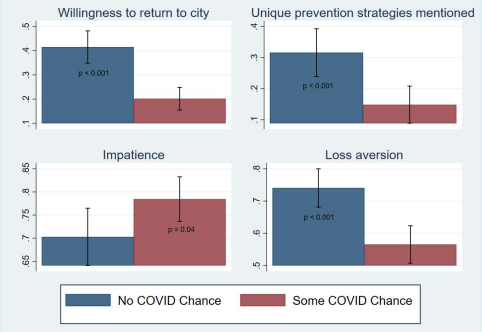
Identification:
- Common unobservables that determine both disease threat as well as the willingness to return (e..g unmeasured risk attitudes); Both the willingness to return and disease threat perception are jointly determined and potentially endogenous.
- COVID-19 disease threat identified using COVID-19 related variables (Kuang et al., 2020)
- Robustness check using bivariate probit model, average treatment effects (ATEs) estimated

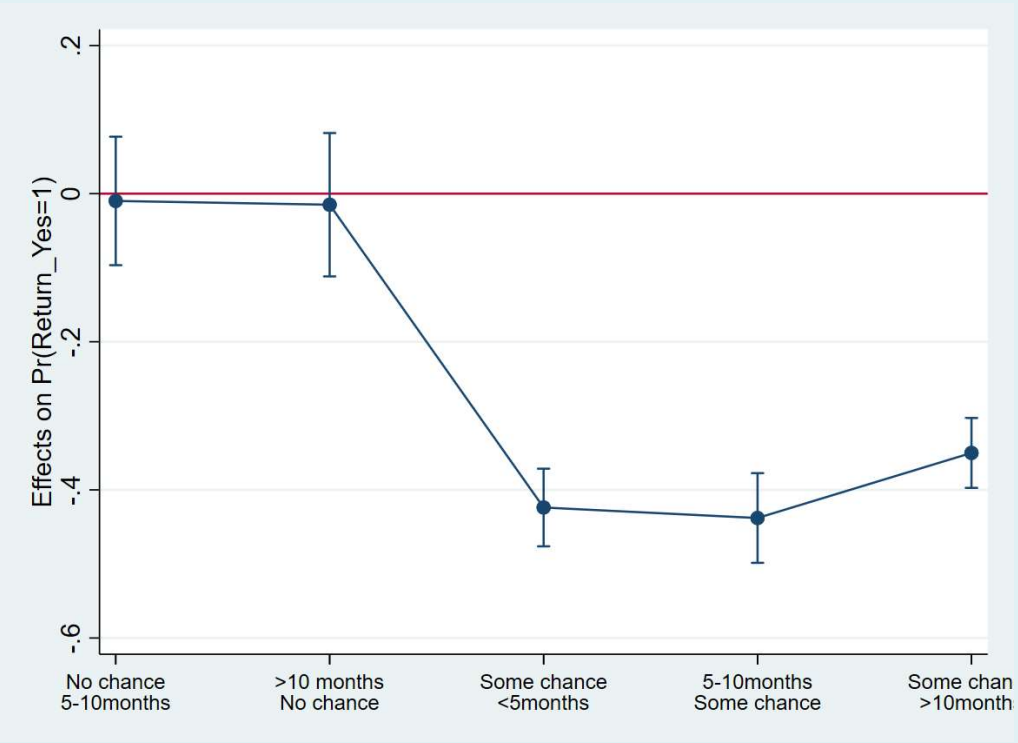
Results

- Impatience associated with higher risk perception, similar to findings in China (Li et al., 2020).
- More information on COVID linked to higher anxiety (Malesza and Kaczmarek, 2021), in turn to higher risk perception
- Return to city decisions are affected by perceived disease threat, heterogeneous by duration of migration, potentially linked to stronger urban place identity and attachment (Scannell and Gifford, 2010) for longer-term migrants (Hernandez et al., 2007; Bonaiuto et al., 2016).

Male migrants in India who perceive a chance of contracting COVID-19 have significantly lower stated likelihood to return to their urban work centres.







Slides

VARUN ARORA,, SUJOY CHAKRAVARTY, HANSIKA KAPOOR, SHAGATA MUKHERJEE, SHUBHABRATA ROY, AND ANIRUDH TAGAT