



Crime Vulnerability and Safety Conditions of Interstate Migrant Construction Workers in Malappuram District

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Abstract

Interstate migrant construction workers constitute a critical segment of Kerala's urban and semi-urban labour force, yet their exposure to crime, exploitation, and unsafe living conditions remains systematically underaddressed. This article examines the crime vulnerability and safety conditions of interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District, Kerala, through a social welfare and public administration lens. Drawing on secondary sources, policy documents, and existing empirical literature, the study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to map the structural conditions that produce vulnerability among this population. The findings reveal that unsafe housing, hazardous worksites, language barriers, weak grievance mechanisms, and fragmented welfare administration combine to create conditions in which exploitation, wage theft, harassment, and physical insecurity are pervasive but largely invisible. The article argues that crime vulnerability among migrant workers cannot be reduced to direct criminal victimisation; it must be understood as a consequence of institutional neglect and administrative fragmentation. The study concludes that a rights-based welfare framework integrating labour inspection, local governance coordination, police responsiveness, and community outreach is essential for meaningful protection of interstate migrant workers in Malappuram District and Kerala more broadly.

Keywords: interstate migrant workers, construction labour, crime vulnerability, safety conditions, welfare administration, Malappuram District, Kerala



Introduction

Interstate migration for work has fundamentally transformed Kerala's labour market over the past three decades. Once characterised predominantly by outward emigration to the Gulf countries and other international destinations, Kerala has emerged as a major receiving state for internal migrants from across India. As of the most recent estimates, approximately 3.5 million interstate migrant workers are engaged in Kerala's economy, concentrated primarily in construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and domestic services (Narayana et al., 2013; Rajan & Bhagat, 2021). The construction sector alone absorbs a substantial and disproportionate share of this workforce, and districts such as Malappuram, where real estate development and infrastructure expansion have accelerated significantly since the early 2000s, represent important and high-density sites of migrant labour concentration.

Malappuram District presents a particularly instructive case for examining migrant worker vulnerability. The district has witnessed rapid urbanisation driven by remittance-fuelled private investment, sustained growth in construction activity across the residential, commercial, and infrastructure segments, and significant demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labour that the local workforce has largely withdrawn from due to improved educational attainment and shifting occupational aspirations (Kumar, 2011). This labour market gap has been filled principally by workers from West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, and Jharkhand, who migrate to Malappuram under informal arrangements mediated almost entirely by contractors and labour intermediaries (Venkiteswaran, 2010; Sreedevi & Gopinath, 2024). These workers occupy the lowest rungs of a complex and often exploitative labour chain, performing physically demanding and hazardous tasks with minimal institutional protection, limited legal awareness, and no meaningful access to formal grievance systems.

Despite their economic indispensability, interstate migrant workers in Kerala remain a structurally marginalised population. Their informality of employment, geographic dislocation from home communities, linguistic isolation in a Malayalam-dominant environment, and near-total dependence on contractors for both work and accommodation create multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities that compound over time. Existing literature on migrant labour in Kerala has drawn attention to overcrowded and insanitary accommodation, inadequate worksite safety, restricted access to healthcare, and limited awareness of legal rights and entitlements (Kumar, 2011; Zachariah & Rajan, 2012; Narayana et al., 2013). However, the specific intersection of safety conditions and crime-related vulnerability at the district level — and the precise role of welfare administration in mediating or exacerbating these conditions — has received insufficient analytical attention in the existing literature.

This article addresses that gap directly. It examines crime vulnerability and safety conditions among interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District with a particular focus on the administrative and institutional dimensions of protection and its failure. The study takes a deliberately broad view of crime vulnerability: one that encompasses not only direct victimisation through theft, physical violence, or fraud, but also the structural conditions — including wage theft, intimidation, coercive labour practices, harassment, and systematic denial of grievance access — that expose workers to sustained harm without necessarily appearing in official crime statistics or formal complaint records. The central argument advanced in this article is that crime vulnerability is as much a product of administrative failure and institutional fragmentation as it is of individual criminal acts.



The article is organised as follows. Following a review of the relevant literature, the paper presents its methodological framework and outlines its analytical approach. The findings are then discussed across five thematic domains: living conditions, worksite safety, crime-related vulnerability, welfare administration gaps, and the need for institutional convergence. A policy suggestions section follows, and the article concludes with a synthesis of the analysis and an outline of the administrative reforms required for stronger and more equitable protection of migrant workers in Malappuram District and across Kerala.

Review of Literature

The literature on interstate migrant workers in Kerala is now substantial, drawing on contributions from sociology, economics, public health, and labour studies. Pioneering institutional research by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation and the Centre for Development Studies documented the rapid growth of in-migration to Kerala from the early 2000s onward, establishing the demographic and economic contours of the phenomenon (Narayana et al., 2013; CDS, 2012). These studies revealed that migrants from West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and other eastern and northern Indian states had largely replaced workers from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in sectors characterised by manual labour and informal employment, particularly construction. The scale of this demographic shift has been significant: estimates of the migrant worker population in Kerala range from 2.5 million in 2016 to nearly 5 million by the early 2020s, with West Bengal consistently identified as the largest source state (Wikipedia, 2026).

Kumar's (2011) foundational study on the vulnerability of unskilled migrant workers in Kerala remains one of the most comprehensive and methodologically robust treatments of the subject. Using primary survey data collected from multiple districts, Kumar identified several overlapping dimensions of vulnerability: inability to claim promised wages, lack of legal awareness, poor and insecure housing, restricted mobility, the absence of social networks in destination areas, and exposure to exploitative contractor practices. His analysis underscored that migrant workers are effectively invisible to the administrative systems nominally designed to protect them. This invisibility is produced not merely by their informal employment status but by a combination of language barriers, geographic concentration in unregulated settlements, and the absence of any meaningful registration or tracking mechanism that would allow state agencies to identify, locate, and reach the migrant population.

Subsequent studies built on this foundation across multiple dimensions. Venkiteswaran (2010) examined the living and working conditions of domestic migrant labourers across Kerala, emphasising the role of contractors as the primary mediators between workers and the labour market, and documenting the exploitative practices that frequently characterise these relationships. Zachariah and Rajan (2012) provided detailed demographic and economic profiles of migrant workers across Kerala districts, mapping their concentration in specific occupational categories and revealing the extreme income inequality between migrant workers and their employers. Sreedevi and Gopinath (2024), in a more recent contribution to the *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, examined wage differentials between migrant construction workers and native workers, finding that migrants consistently receive lower wages for equivalent work and face significantly worse conditions in terms of occupational safety and discrimination at the workplace.



The public health literature has added a further dimension to the understanding of migrant vulnerability. Studies published through the National Centre for Biotechnology Information and related platforms have documented the health risks associated with construction labour, overcrowded housing, restricted access to medical care, and the particular absence of occupational health protections for workers engaged in informal employment (Rajan & Bhagat, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the depth of these vulnerabilities with particular clarity and urgency, as migrant workers across Kerala found themselves stranded without food, shelter, income, or access to reliable health information, dramatically revealing the fragility of the informal and contractor-mediated systems on which they had been entirely dependent (NCBI, 2020).

Several more recent contributions have focused specifically on welfare administration and the gap between policy provisions and practical implementation. Research published in the International Journal of Social Science and Human Research and related outlets has documented the persistent failure of existing welfare schemes to reach their intended beneficiaries among the migrant construction workforce (IJSSHR, 2023). The IMPEX Ranking of 2019, developed by India Migration Now, positioned Kerala as the most migrant-friendly state in India in terms of policy provisions. However, the same body of research that acknowledges Kerala's relative policy progressivism consistently emphasises the wide gap between formal provisions and on-the-ground reality. Studies from Mahatma Gandhi University's Centre for Migration Policy and Inclusive Governance have documented increasing incidents of xenophobia against migrant workers in Kerala's media and social media environments, adding a social hostility dimension to the structural and administrative vulnerabilities already identified in the literature (Policy Circle, 2024).

What remains underexamined in this literature, and what this article seeks specifically to address, is the nexus between safety conditions and crime-related vulnerability in the district-level context of construction labour. While the existing literature establishes a compelling and well-documented general picture of migrant vulnerability in Kerala, district-specific analyses that connect housing insecurity, worksite conditions, and welfare administration gaps to crime vulnerability — defined broadly and with attention to its structural determinants — are notably absent. This article contributes to filling that analytical gap.

Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To assess the safety conditions of interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District.
2. To examine the forms and structural determinants of crime-related vulnerability faced by interstate migrant construction workers in the district.
3. To analyse the role and limitations of welfare administration in protecting migrant workers from crime, exploitation, and unsafe conditions.
4. To identify policy and institutional gaps and recommend administrative reforms for the effective safeguarding of migrant labour in Malappuram District and Kerala more broadly.



Research Questions

The study is organised around the following research questions:

1. What safety conditions do interstate migrant construction workers face in Malappuram District, and how are these conditions produced by the structural features of informal construction employment?
2. What forms of crime-related vulnerability are these workers exposed to, and what structural and institutional factors sustain this exposure?
3. How effective is the existing welfare administration framework in addressing safety and crime vulnerability among migrant construction workers in Malappuram District?
4. What policy and institutional reforms are required to strengthen protection and reduce vulnerability?

Methodology

This article adopts a descriptive and analytical research design, drawing primarily on secondary data. The data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents and reports published by the Kerala Government's Department of Labour and Skills, institutional research reports from the Centre for Development Studies, the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, and the Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment, as well as publicly available studies on interstate migrant labour vulnerability in India and Kerala. This secondary literature-based approach is appropriate for a study whose aim is to synthesise existing evidence and develop a policy-analytical argument about the structural determinants of vulnerability and the administrative conditions that produce or perpetuate it.

The unit of analysis is interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District. The study does not present original survey data, and makes no claims to statistical representativeness. Instead, it draws on the substantial body of evidence already accumulated in the research literature to identify recurring patterns in safety conditions, crime-related vulnerability, and administrative response. This approach is consistent with what Yin (2018) describes as analytical generalisation: the derivation of policy-relevant conclusions from synthesised case evidence whose value lies in theoretical and explanatory contribution rather than in statistical inference.

The analysis is organised around four thematic domains derived from the literature review: living conditions, worksite safety, crime-related vulnerability, and welfare administration gaps. Each domain is examined for both its empirical dimensions — as documented in existing research — and its structural and institutional implications. The policy discussion integrates insights from welfare administration theory, criminological frameworks concerned with structural vulnerability, and comparative evidence from other contexts of internal labour migration in India.



Findings and Discussion

6.1 Living Conditions and Safety Risks

One of the most consistently documented findings in the literature on interstate migrant workers in Kerala is the severe inadequacy of their living conditions. In Malappuram District, as in other construction-intensive areas of the state, migrant workers typically reside in contractor-arranged accommodation. This may take the form of makeshift barracks constructed adjacent to active worksites, overcrowded rented rooms shared among large numbers of workers in peri-urban residential areas, or informal settlements on the fringes of developing localities (Narayana et al., 2013; Kumar, 2011). These arrangements are consistently characterised by severe overcrowding, extremely limited sanitation facilities, poor ventilation, inadequate access to clean water, and the complete absence of privacy or security. A single room may house between eight and fifteen workers, with shared toilet facilities serving dozens of residents. These conditions are not exceptional; they are the norm across the informal migrant construction workforce.

The safety implications of these living conditions are multiple and mutually reinforcing. Overcrowded and poorly supervised accommodation creates physical conditions that facilitate theft, harassment, and interpersonal conflict. Workers who store wages, mobile phones, or other personal valuables in shared spaces are exposed to persistent risk of theft, and the absence of any formal security or property protection mechanism leaves losses entirely unredressed. The concentration of large numbers of socially isolated and linguistically marginalised men in informal and unregulated spaces creates an environment in which interpersonal violence, exploitation, and abuse can occur without institutional oversight or accountability.

Housing insecurity carries a further, less visible but critically important dimension: the structural link between accommodation and employment that constrains workers' capacity for complaint. Because accommodation is arranged and controlled by contractors rather than accessed independently through the open market, workers' right to remain in their lodging is directly and entirely contingent on their continued employment with that contractor. This dependency functions as a powerful mechanism of control. Any worker who raises concerns about wages, working conditions, or treatment faces the prospect of losing not only their employment but simultaneously their shelter, hundreds or thousands of kilometres from home. In this sense, housing insecurity is not merely a welfare deficit but a structural condition that actively sustains the exploitability of migrant construction workers (Venkiteswaran, 2010; NCBI, 2020).

The Apna Ghar scheme, the Kerala Government's primary policy response to migrant worker housing insecurity, has had very limited practical impact. As of the most recent documented figures, only a single Apna Ghar facility existed in the entire state, offering approximately 620 beds — an entirely negligible provision relative to the estimated 3.5 to 5 million migrant workers resident in Kerala at any given time (NCBI, 2020). The scheme has also been criticised in the research literature for effectively subsidising employers' accommodation costs rather than directly addressing workers' housing security, and for failing to account for the footloose and project-contingent character of construction employment, which means that workers frequently relocate between sites and cannot rely on any fixed residential facility.



6.2 Worksite Safety

Construction work is among the most physically hazardous forms of employment in any economy. Workers engaged in construction are routinely exposed to the risks of falls from height, electrocution, being struck by machinery or falling materials, respiratory hazards from dust and chemical exposure, and musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive heavy labour. In Malappuram District, construction activity encompasses a wide spectrum of project types, from private residential buildings and commercial developments to larger infrastructure schemes, but compliance with the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996 — which mandates a range of safety provisions including protective equipment, first aid facilities, and adequate worksite supervision — is highly inconsistent across the informal and semi-formal construction sector where the overwhelming majority of migrant workers are employed (Sreedevi & Gopinath, 2024).

Existing studies on construction labour in Kerala document a persistent and widespread absence of basic safety equipment and practices at informal worksites. Workers are regularly deployed on elevated structures without adequate fall protection, harnesses, or safety nets. Helmets and protective footwear are inconsistently provided and, where provided, inconsistently used due to inadequate safety culture and time pressures imposed by contractors. The pace of work demanded in competitive informal construction markets leaves little space for safety precautions that would slow productivity (Kumar, 2011). Informal employment arrangements — under which workers are classified as daily wage earners rather than formal employees — exempt most contractors in the informal sector from the obligations that the Employees' State Insurance Act, the Workmen's Compensation Act, and related legislation impose on registered employers. Workers who are injured on-site therefore have extremely limited avenues for formal compensation or redress.

The crime dimension of worksite safety emerges most clearly in the documented practices of wage denial and coercive labour that pervade the informal construction sector. Workers who are injured on the job may be summarily dismissed without any compensation. Workers who raise safety concerns risk being replaced immediately from the large and insecure pool of migrant labour available to contractors. The fragmented and multi-layered contractor chain that characterises construction in Kerala — in which unskilled labourers at the base of the chain often have no knowledge of the identity of the ultimate project owner — makes it practically impossible to assign legal responsibility for safety violations or to pursue formal redress for wage theft, since each link in the contractor chain can deflect responsibility to another (Kumar, 2011; Narayana et al., 2013).

Labour inspectors attached to the Department of Labour and Skills are formally responsible for worksite inspection and enforcement of safety standards. However, the ratio of inspectors to active worksites in a district like Malappuram — which contains thousands of concurrent construction projects across its rapidly urbanising landscape — renders systematic inspection of informal and small-scale sites practically impossible with current staffing levels and administrative resources. This creates a structural enforcement gap that allows safety violations to persist without consequence and that effectively signals to contractors and workers alike that formal safety standards are aspirational and unenforced rather than operationally binding.



6.3 Crime Vulnerability: Forms and Structural Determinants

Crime vulnerability, as the conceptual framework of this article establishes, extends substantially beyond direct criminal victimisation. It encompasses the full range of exploitative, harmful, and coercive practices to which a population is structurally exposed because of conditions that systematically limit their access to protection, information, and redress. For interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District, this vulnerability takes several distinct and interrelated forms, each of which is individually significant and collectively constitutive of a sustained condition of structural insecurity.

Wage theft is among the most prevalent and most systematically underreported forms of crime vulnerability experienced by migrant construction workers. The mechanisms of wage theft are varied: workers may be paid below the wage level promised at the point of recruitment, may have unexplained deductions made for housing, tools, or transport that were not disclosed in advance, may experience delays in payment that stretch from weeks to months, or may be denied payment entirely when a project concludes or when they seek to change contractors. These practices are enabled and sustained by the uniformly informal character of employment contracts in the sector, which are oral rather than written, leaving workers without any documentation with which to substantiate a wage claim (Kumar, 2011; Sreedevi & Gopinath, 2024). Workers who attempt to seek formal redress through the labour office face significant procedural barriers: they lack documentation, they may be unfamiliar with complaint procedures, they may not speak Malayalam, and they are acutely aware of the risk that formal complaint will result in blacklisting from future work with the same contractor or within the same local construction network.

Deception by recruitment intermediaries constitutes a second significant and structurally embedded form of crime vulnerability. Workers from source states such as West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar are frequently recruited through informal agents who make specific and often detailed promises about wage levels, nature of work, accommodation standards, and working conditions that are not honoured upon arrival in Kerala (IJSSHR, 2023). This deceptive recruitment process — which in its more severe manifestations constitutes trafficking under Indian law — places workers in a position of simultaneous indebtedness to the recruiter and subjection to conditions worse than those agreed upon. The vulnerability created by this initial deception is dramatically intensified by geographic displacement; workers who arrive in Malappuram after a journey of 2,000 to 3,000 kilometres are entirely without local networks, entirely dependent on the contractor system that has already deceived them, and entirely without the resources to return home independently.

Physical intimidation, verbal abuse, and social hostility represent further dimensions of crime vulnerability that are particularly difficult to quantify but extensively documented in qualitative and ethnographic accounts of migrant worker experience in Kerala. Workers who raise concerns about wages or conditions may face threats and physical intimidation. Workers from north and east Indian states may encounter xenophobic hostility from segments of local communities, a phenomenon that research at Mahatma Gandhi University has linked to the proliferation of negative narratives about migrant workers in local media and social media environments (Policy Circle, 2024). The social distance between migrant workers and host communities means that such hostility is rarely subject to formal complaint or institutional response.



Workers' near-universal reluctance to report exploitative or harmful experiences to formal institutions is a critical dimension of the vulnerability cycle. Fear of job and accommodation loss if complaints become known to employers functions as an immediate and practical deterrent that overrides any awareness of formal rights. Language barriers make meaningful interaction with police and labour authorities extremely difficult for workers who speak Bengali, Odia, or Hindi but have no functional knowledge of Malayalam or English. These factors collectively ensure that the vast majority of harmful and exploitative experiences remain unreported, invisible to official statistics, and consequently outside the scope of any formal welfare or protective response. The result is a systematic undercounting of the incidence of exploitation and crime vulnerability that creates a false impression of manageable risk and thereby reduces institutional urgency.

6.4 Welfare Administration: Gaps and Structural Failures

Kerala has developed a more substantive and formally progressive policy framework for interstate migrant workers than most other Indian states. The state's IMPEX Ranking of first place in 2019 reflected its comparatively advanced approach to migrant welfare policy, encompassing provisions in health, housing, registration, insurance, and grievance mechanisms (IMN, 2019). The Department of Labour and Skills has implemented registration drives, multilingual health schemes, the Apna Ghar housing programme, the AAWAZ insurance scheme, and various food and sanitation initiatives aimed at the migrant worker population. The COVID-19 pandemic response, though limited in scale, demonstrated that the state possesses the institutional infrastructure for coordinated multi-agency action targeting migrant workers when political will and administrative clarity are mobilised (NCBI, 2020).

However, the consistent and convergent finding across studies conducted at different times, using different methods, and focusing on different aspects of migrant welfare is that policy provisions have not translated into effective ground-level protection for the majority of migrant workers. Several structural mechanisms account for this persistent gap between intent and implementation. First, registration rates among migrant workers remain very low across Kerala and in Malappuram District specifically. Workers who are not registered with welfare boards or government databases cannot access scheme benefits, and registration requires documentation — identity proof, employment evidence, address confirmation — and procedural knowledge that many workers either lack or cannot easily provide given the oral and informal character of their employment. The absence of proactive and mobile registration services means that the burden of scheme access rests entirely on individual workers who are simultaneously the least likely to navigate bureaucratic processes successfully.

Second, inter-departmental coordination across the agencies responsible for migrant welfare is structurally weak. Effective and comprehensive protection of migrant workers requires coordinated action by the Department of Labour and Skills, Local Self-Government Institutions (LSGs), the police, the health department, the housing board, and community organisations. In practice, each of these agencies operates within its own administrative silo, with limited information sharing, unclear assignment of responsibilities for migrant welfare cases, and no standing mechanism for joint response to exploitation or safety concerns. LSGs, which are geographically closest to workers' everyday circumstances and theoretically most capable of early identification of problems, frequently lack the resources, the mandate clarity, and the training necessary to engage proactively and effectively with migrant populations (NCBI, 2020).



Third, the design of welfare schemes has systematically failed to account for the specific characteristics of the migrant construction workforce. Workers who are engaged on short-term projects and who move frequently between sites may not satisfy the residency or continuity-of-employment requirements that several schemes impose as eligibility conditions. Workers from distant states who return to their home states periodically cannot maintain access to Kerala-based health or social security schemes during periods of absence. The footloose, seasonal, and project-contingent character of construction employment is fundamentally at odds with welfare systems designed around the assumptions of stable, place-bound, and formally documented employment.

Fourth, outreach and awareness remain severely inadequate relative to the scale of need. Government information about welfare schemes is predominantly produced and disseminated in Malayalam, and materials in Hindi, Bengali, Odia, or other major migrant-source languages are limited in availability and reach. Workers who are unaware that welfare schemes exist, or who cannot navigate the registration and access process, are excluded from the formal protection system regardless of their nominal eligibility. As documented across multiple studies, awareness of specific schemes such as AAWAZ among the target migrant population is consistently very low (IJSSHR, 2023; NCBI, 2020). The cumulative effect of these structural failures is a welfare administration that is reactive and residual rather than proactive and preventive — responding to incidents severe enough to breach institutional visibility, while the everyday conditions of chronic vulnerability persist unaddressed.

6.5 Need for Institutional Convergence

The analysis presented across the preceding sections points toward a central and unavoidable conclusion: the protection of interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District requires not incremental adjustments to existing programmes but a fundamental transformation in the institutional architecture of welfare administration. The fragmentation of responsibility across agencies, the persistent mismatch between scheme design and the characteristics of the construction workforce, and the absence of proactive outreach and enforcement capacity together constitute a systemic failure that no single agency acting within its existing mandate and resources can remedy in isolation.

Institutional convergence, in this context, refers to the development of coordinated, multi-agency systems that share information, divide responsibilities clearly and formally, operate with a shared understanding of the migrant worker population as a priority protection group, and are accountable to measurable outcomes in terms of worker safety and welfare access. Kerala's own experience during the COVID-19 pandemic offers partial evidence that this kind of convergence is institutionally feasible. The emergency response engaged the Department of Labour and Skills, the Department of Local Self-Government, the health department, and LSGs in coordinated action, with designated officials at every administrative level bearing specific responsibilities for reaching migrant workers (NCBI, 2020). While this response had significant scale limitations, it demonstrated that the institutional capacity for coordinated protective action exists when it is mobilised by political will and administrative clarity.

In the specific district-level context of Malappuram, institutional convergence would require the establishment of designated district-level coordination mechanisms for migrant welfare, with regular structured data sharing between the police, labour office, health department, and LSGs regarding the



location, population size, and conditions of migrant settlements and construction clusters. It would require clear formal protocols for joint response to reports of exploitation, harassment, or safety violations involving migrant workers, with defined timelines and accountabilities. And it would require sustained and adequately resourced investment in multilingual outreach, mobile registration services, and community-based intermediaries from migrant source communities who can serve as trusted channels between workers and formal institutions.

Policy Suggestions

Based on the analysis presented in this article, the following policy recommendations are offered for Malappuram District and for the broader Kerala governance framework for interstate migrant workers.

First, dedicated worker help desks should be established at major construction clusters throughout Malappuram District. These desks should be staffed by multilingual officers capable of communicating in Hindi, Bengali, and Odia as well as Malayalam, and should be operationally connected to the labour office, police, and LSG systems. They should provide services including registration support, information on welfare scheme entitlements, and confidential complaint registration.

Second, worksite inspection by labour department officials should be systematically expanded, with specific and enforceable protocols targeting unregistered and informal construction sites where the density of migrant employment and the severity of safety violations are greatest. Inspection findings should be integrated into contractor registration and licensing systems, so that repeated safety violations have tangible consequences for contractors' ability to secure work, particularly on public or government-funded projects.

Third, police-labour department coordination should be institutionalised through a formal joint protocol for responding to wage theft, exploitation, and violence complaints involving migrant workers. Designated police stations in areas with high concentrations of migrant workers should have officers with specific migrant liaison responsibilities, and investment should be made in language capacity — at minimum the ability to communicate in Hindi — at these stations.

Fourth, awareness and outreach programmes should be systematically designed and delivered in the languages most prevalent among the migrant workforce. Digital channels, including WhatsApp groups coordinated through community-level contacts, should be used in conjunction with in-person sessions at worksites, settlements, and community gathering spaces. These programmes should address not only welfare scheme entitlements but also workers' legal rights and the channels available for complaint.

Fifth, a confidential and multilingual grievance hotline should be established at the district level, accessible by telephone and allowing workers to report exploitation, unsafe conditions, or harassment without requiring physical presence at any office and without immediate disclosure of the complainant's identity to their employer. This mechanism should have published and enforced response timelines and clear accountability for follow-up action.

Sixth, the eligibility conditions of existing welfare schemes should be comprehensively reviewed and revised to account for the structural realities of construction employment: its mobility, informality, short-term project basis, and seasonal patterns. Portability of scheme benefits, simplified and mobile



registration processes, community-witness arrangements as substitutes for documentary requirements, and the elimination of continuity-of-employment prerequisites would together dramatically extend the practical reach of existing schemes to the most vulnerable segments of the migrant construction workforce.

Conclusion

This article has examined crime vulnerability and safety conditions among interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District, Kerala, through the lens of welfare administration and public policy analysis. The analysis has demonstrated that vulnerability among this population is structural in character rather than incidental or individual — produced and sustained by a combination of overcrowded and insecure housing, hazardous worksites, exploitative contractor relationships, and an administrative system that is systematically and persistently unable to reach the workers it is formally designed to protect.

The conceptual framework of crime vulnerability developed in this article extends beyond the narrow confines of direct criminal victimisation to encompass the full range of exploitative and harmful practices that migrant construction workers face in their everyday working and living conditions, including wage theft, deceptive recruitment, physical and verbal intimidation, denial of safety provisions, and systematic exclusion from grievance mechanisms. These practices are enabled and sustained by the structural conditions of informality, linguistic isolation, geographic displacement, and institutional fragmentation. They are, in a meaningful and practically important sense, crimes of administrative neglect as much as crimes of individual agency.

Effective protection of interstate migrant construction workers in Malappuram District requires a fundamental reorientation of welfare administration — from the reactive, scheme-centred, and siloed model that currently prevails toward a proactive, rights-based, and institutionally convergent model in which coordinated action across agencies and levels of government creates real and accessible safety in the everyday lives of workers. The goal is not merely the expansion of existing programmes but the creation of institutional conditions in which workers can access protection before harm occurs, not only after it has been experienced and reported.

As interstate migrant workers become an increasingly permanent and structurally indispensable feature of Kerala's economy and society, the administrative obligation to protect their safety and rights becomes correspondingly more urgent and more central to the legitimacy of the state's welfare governance. This article has aimed to contribute to the evidence base and the analytical framework for that protection by articulating the structural dimensions of vulnerability and the specific institutional conditions required for its meaningful and sustained reduction.



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