

RATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

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AU

The Trouble
with Foreign
Workers



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In the last month, as Covid-19 cases rose to over 16,000 in Singapore, with the overwhelming majority of the April increases found among migrant workers living in worker dormitories, much of the discourse has been on why the conditions of dormitories made the situation so bad.

It is a little ironic that it was Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), an NGO for

the equitable treatment of migrant workers in Singapore, who pointed out that it was the crowding in our dormitories that made the spread of infection a very real prospect. Our fears have come to pass, and now everybody is talking about it.

Indeed, the situation is bad. The following table lists the top 10 countries (excluding those with fewer than a million population) ranked by the number of Covid-19 cases per million. Singapore is right up there at number eight.

It’s also interesting to see Qatar in the top 10. From what I’ve read in the press, the majority of Qatar’s Covid-19 cases are also from worker dormitories, though I have yet to obtain precise numbers.

There’s no denying now that density and

Ranking	Country	Total cases	Total cases per million population
1	Spain	236,899	5,067
2	Qatar	12,564	4,361
3	Belgium	47,859	4,129
4	Ireland	20,253	4,102
5	Switzerland	29,407	3,398
6	Italy	203,591	3,367
7	US	1,064,572	3,216
8	Singapore	16,169	2,764
9	France	166,420	2,550
10	UK	165,221	2,434

Source: Worldometers.info, 30 April 2020.
Countries with < 1 million population excluded.

poor ventilation in our dorms are key factors enabling pathogen transmission. But why did Singapore choose to go the route of such high density accommodation for workers, packing 12, 16 or 20 men into a room with double-decker bunks spaced no more than a metre apart?



Alex Au is a human rights activist and vice-president of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). His first involvement in civil society began some twenty years ago, when he was prominent in Singapore's LGBT movement. He is also known in Singapore as a socio-political commentator, and has contributed chapters to various books on politics and society.

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