

Life in refugee camps wreaks havoc on children's health

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Greek and Norwegian researchers have conducted a study on the health conditions in six refugee camps in Greece.

"We found high levels of trauma," says Professor Terje A. Eikemo.

He heads the Centre for Global Health Inequalities Research (CHAIN) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). CHAIN collaborated with the National Center for Social Research in Athens, and others, to survey refugee health.

"It's important to systematically map the health situation and needs of the refugees in the camps. We know way too little and this is slowing down the asylum processes," Eikemo says.

But what we do know is disturbing, especially now, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Problems increase with time

The longer people spend in refugee camps, the more the problems increase, especially for vulnerable groups.

Two-thirds of refugees are plagued by memories of scary and painful events. About half of the refugees report being extremely disturbed by such events.

Sleep problems and concentration difficulties are common, as are being frightened and having strong reactions when reminded of past events.

CHAIN is working to monitor global health. One of their goals is to provide knowledge that can reduce social health disparities in and between countries.

Huge number of refugees in Greece

Since 2014 Greece has become the transit country for many refugees in connection with unrest in the Middle East. Due to its [geographical location](#), the country has received a disproportionate number of migrants.

Numbers peaked in 2015, when a total of 857 000 refugees arrived in Greece. They were largely accommodated in refugee camps, where tens of thousands still live. Life in the camps is wreaking havoc on the health of many refugees.

"People lack any sense of security," says Eikemo.

Children, the elderly and women

Being physically safe in a [camp](#) doesn't mean that people find peace. Seven out of ten migrants have children, who are more susceptible to trauma than adults. The children are especially prone to worsening health the longer they are in the camps.

"Unfortunately, we're seeing a connection between how long the children have been in the camps and their health situation," says Eikemo.

This finding is based on parents' assessment of their children. More than half of the parents report that their children have suffered from significantly worse health since their journey began. It is also worrisome that most of the respondents do not feel safe in the camps, and that a large proportion of the refugees do not have access to shelters that provide privacy or clean facilities.

"Although most refugees have access to free food, toilets, showers and mattresses, that is not enough to prevent the children's declining health over time," says Eikemo.

The elderly in [refugee](#) camps also have a harder time getting their health needs met than others. Women who lack shelter that offers some privacy are another particularly vulnerable group.

Feel the symptoms later

In particular, the refugees highlight neck and back problems, allergies, extreme headaches and other chronic conditions, often in combination. The more time they've spent in the camps, the more refugees report these types of health issues.

One reason may be that the early health surveys in the camps concentrated on other [health conditions](#), such as infectious diseases. Still, only four out of ten refugees report that they have been examined by a doctor.

"Once people are physically safe in [refugee camps](#) after fleeing, they start to feel the symptoms," Eikemo says.

Upon arrival at the camps, the proportion of people with ailments is about the same as the European average. Over time, the percentage of chronic illnesses increases dramatically.

"Our findings indicate that staying in the camps is destroying the health of both children and adults. It is simply the wrong place to be for people who have been through such traumatizing experiences. Good health is a human right. It's incomprehensible from a public health and human rights perspective that families—and especially children—are still in these camps," says Eikemo.

He says the researchers have not had the opportunity to follow up with the participants again to see how things turned out for them later.

Challenging work

The survey was conducted on two occasions in 2016. The work was challenging because it required the approval of both the authorities and aid organizations, which was given at short notice. Boats and interpreters had to be at the ready, and the researchers were allowed to spend only a limited amount of time in the camps.

The researchers interviewed one person from every three tents or households in order to obtain the most representative sampling possible.

Researchers wanted to find out why people had fled and whether they had experienced traumatizing or discriminatory experiences before, during or after fleeing, as well as to identify needs, the reception conditions in the camps and refugees' health situations.

The researchers used their own trauma index, developed by Harvard University researchers who also participated in the project. A total of 367 people were surveyed, which accounted for approximately four per cent of the refugees in the six camps.

The research project involved approximately 60 researchers from several countries. It was led by Terje Andreas Eikemo of CHAIN/NTNU and Theoni Stathopoulou of the National Center for Social Research in Athens, who is also affiliated with the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma in the United States.

More information: Christopher Jamil De Montgomery et al, Asylum-seeking Parents' Reports of Health Deterioration in Their Children since Fleeing Their Home Country, *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fez018](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez018)

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