Extensive analysis finds migrants at higher risk for COVID-19 globally

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Refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants were exposed to significantly higher health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic than other population groups. A new study shows a 84% higher risk of...
infection and a 46% higher mortality rate among migrants compared to the general population.

The findings are the result of extensive research led by Bielefeld University and realized in cooperation with the UN Migration Agency IOM and researchers from Heidelberg University Hospital and the Swedish universities of Uppsala and Umeå.

The analysis, published in *eClinicalMedicine*, includes data from more than 53 million people, including both migrants and natives from 22 countries.

According to the study, systemic barriers often lead to poorer health outcomes for migrants. These include crowded living conditions, precarious working conditions and limited access to health care and social security.

**Migrants persistently at higher risk**

"Migrants have been at an increased risk of contracting SARS-CoV-2 not only in the early phases, but throughout the entire pandemic," says the principal investigator Professor Dr. Kayvan Bozorgmehr from Bielefeld University.

"Migrants infected with SARS-CoV-2 were not hospitalized more often; but they more often experienced severe course of disease, which resulted in a higher number of admissions to intensive care units. While clinical deaths were lower among migrants—probably due to their younger average age—population-based mortality tended to be higher, especially in high-income countries."

The authors conclude from the results of the study that health and social policies need to be more inclusive. "National pandemic plans must
adequately consider refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons," says Bozorgmehr.

The study includes results from 370 empirical reports from 17,088 datasets worldwide, up to September 2023. It includes a **meta-analysis** of more than 53 million participants, considering studies on COVID-19 infection risk, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, mortality and vaccination rates among migrants.

"Our study reveals that health information systems have significant gaps in capturing migration characteristics, which renders migrants invisible in official data," says Maren Hintermeier, first author of the study and doctoral student at Bielefeld University. The authors conclude that the lack of health information has impeded the accurate evaluation of health inequalities among migrants, and measures to reduce them. This was particularly evident in the case of inequalities in immunization.

Although only 8% of the included studies reported data on vaccination coverage in migrant groups, two-thirds of these studies found lower immunization rates among migrants compared to non-migrants.

"This global study demonstrates the impact of pandemics on migrants worldwide. It also points to effective strategies to better protect **public health** by including migrants in regional, national and global responses," says Dr. Poonam Dhavan, the Director of the Migration Health Division at the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Migration Agency.

"The findings and solutions presented in this report can help policy makers and program implementers develop strategies and interventions that not only promote equity for **migrants**, but also lead to better health protection for the entire population. These lessons must not be forgotten in future health emergencies."
The study was coordinated by the Rapid Review Response Unit (RRRU(Un) at the School of Public Health at Bielefeld University. This unit systematically collects and analyzes evidence on health determinants and population-based interventions. The aim is to support evidence-based decisions in the health care system.


Provided by Bielefeld University


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