

COVID - 19 IMPACT ON STRANDED MIGRANTS

This paper aims to consolidate available information on the impact of COVID-19 on stranded migrants, to gauge a better understanding of their evolving challenges and needs, and to serve as a first step towards the (re)design of tailored programmes, advocacy and responses.¹ The analysis is based on the qualitative and quantitative data collected by IOM on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants through various primary and secondary sources as part of its Impact on Migrants initiative². As such, the paper points to different categories of COVID-19 impacts on stranded migrants, the international cooperation on return and readmission between countries of destination and countries of origin and how these inform and impact solutions for stranded migrants, and reporting strengths and weaknesses. The paper builds on the [Issue Brief on COVID-19 and Stranded Migrants](#) prepared by the Return Task Force and on the recommendations for actions included in it.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 emergency on global health and mobility is historically unprecedented in size and scope. Containment policies and measures to restrict global human mobility, which are aimed at mitigating the spread of the virus and its consequences, have affected various population categories, including migrants, in diverse and complex ways. The COVID-19 mobility policies and measures – spanning from various travel restrictions, health requirements and measures to full border closures and nation-wide and/or localized lockdowns – have, in some cases, created new challenges for migrants whilst in parallel exacerbated their existing vulnerabilities. The imposition of border closures and travel bans have left a significant number of migrants stranded, including seasonal workers, temporary residence holders, international students, migrants that travelled for medical treatment abroad, beneficiaries of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), seafarers and many others.

To better understand how the pandemic affects global mobility and migrants particularly, IOM has been monitoring COVID-19 related mobility restrictions imposed by countries, territories, and areas and its effect on different population categories, including migrants, under an initiative called Impact on Migrants. Given the unprecedented and highly dynamic situation, it is impossible to quantify the exact number of migrants who were, or are currently, stranded globally, and this paper does not aim to do so. Additionally, while the typology of emerging issues faced by migrants due to COVID-19 becomes clearer, though increasingly complex, the compilation of both official and unofficial data is considered a large underestimation of the number of migrants stranded or otherwise impacted by COVID-19.

¹ This paper is produced under the aegis of IOM's COVID-19 Return Taskforce, which was created to ensure a coherent approach to IOM's support to address the challenges of returning migrants during the pandemic.

² IOM established the Impact on Migrants initiative to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and its related measures and restrictions has impacted different population groups, including migrants, through observed key trends collected from primary and secondary sources.

Instead, this initiative, which involves different areas of IOM internal expertise, attempts to collect numbers of migrants, their nationality, location, and type of problems that they are facing when there are public or internal reports. It is limited to available information collected and reported by IOM missions, governments, and media – not directly by migrants – to define categories of problems that have emerged and types of assistance needed. This paper also seeks to provide context to the situation and briefly discuss possible solutions for stranded migrants through information (available to IOM) on existing return and readmission frameworks between countries of destination and with countries of origin whose nationals are stranded in large numbers and/or are particularly vulnerable. The sections below provide more details on IOMs efforts to sketch COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants and outline the various sources used as well as offer key findings and estimates of the number of stranded migrants.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS

While the initiative provides a general estimate of the number of stranded migrants affected by Covid-19, the main aim of this exercise is to provide a qualitative analysis by identifying the typologies of problems, vulnerabilities and needs that have emerged as a result of COVID-19, to highlight new or emerging issues, and provide factual examples of the impacts of COVID-19 on mobility and migrants. With the changing COVID-19 complexities and context in mind and in collaboration with different IOM units, the information is collected and structured around the below categories. Given the lack of a pre-existing taxonomy of issues for COVID-19 impacts on migrants, the below has been developed on the basis of evolving discussions between different areas of IOM expertise³. As situations evolve due to COVID-19, emerging issues that are identified as affecting many migrants or issues prioritized by IOM may result in the creation of new categories of migrants impacted by COVID-19, such a “seafarers” and “migrant fatalities”. It is also worth noting that the categories are not mutually exclusive. One or a group of migrants can fall in one or more categories, at same time or subsequently. What is important to note is that each one of them exacerbates further their initial vulnerabilities. The definitions are intended to provide a taxonomy of cases which are then tagged under one or more categories:

As a result of COVID-19 measures, migrants find themselves in a number of precarious situations:

- *Stranded migrants* are individuals outside of their country of habitual residence, wishing to return home but are unable to do so due to mobility restrictions related to COVID-19
- *Destitute migrants* are individuals who have lost their means of support and are unable to meet their basic needs
- *Evicted migrants* are individuals who have lost access to safe shelter due to COVID-19
- *Returning migrants* are previously stranded individuals who have returned to their country of origin/resident country (irrespective of the modalities of the return)
- *Migrants in camps, detention centres or camp-like settings* are populations who have been residing in transit centres, detention centres or camp/camp-like settings that have been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

³ The IOM units includes the following: the Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative (MICIC), Migrant Protection and Assistance (MPA), Resettlement and Movement Management (RMM), Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Media and Communication Division (MCD), Immigration and Border Management (IBM), Migration Health Department (MHD) and Labour and Human Development (LHD)

- *Migrants that are in humanitarian/conflict settings*, are individuals living in countries/areas affected by conflict and/or humanitarian crisis (outside of camp and camp-like settings) and which communities have been affected by COVID-19.
- *Migrant workers (both in the formal and informal sectors) facing additional hardship*: individuals in work and living conditions that expose migrants to contracting COVID-19
- *Migrants at sea*: individuals who experience different and/or new sets of challenges while at sea, including seafarers and marine personnel as well as migrants who embark on journeys at sea despite COVID-19 containment measures and who face new difficulties as a result.

Migrants may also be experiencing vulnerability to abuse, exploitation, neglect, and deliberate deprivation as result of or exacerbated by COVID-19, including⁴:

- Human trafficking
- Sexual violence, exploitation, or abuse
- Separation from family, parents and/or guardians
- Xenophobia and stigma
- Health related issues, including mental health challenges

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of migrant conforms with IOM's Glossary on Migration. This is based on the common understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. As a result, migrants encompass a multitude of population categories, including travellers, students, short-term visitors, and individuals whose employment status is not known.

OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY REPORTED ISSUES

A number of complex issues emerged through the COVID-19 Impact on Migrants monitoring initiative. These are presented according to two main aspects: movement-related issues due to COVID-19 responses and additional vulnerabilities experienced by different population groups, including migrants, due to their specific context.

Movement-related Issues due to COVID-19

Hindered mobility has been one of the most common impacts of COVID-19 on different categories including migrants. Many migrants are unable to continue their journey and remain stranded in transit countries, and many others could not leave their countries and embark on the first legs of their journeys. Migrants stranded at airports, land border crossing areas or at sea were featured in multiple reports as were migrants camping in front of Embassies asking for support from their Governments (for example, hundreds of migrants from the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela have been camping outside their respective embassies in Chile requesting support to return home).

⁴ The list provided below is non-exhaustive list of examples. In addition, it should be acknowledged that the above categories in majority of the cases overlap and one person can experience one or more of the situations listed above.

[Cost and logistics of travel](#) was identified as a specific challenge to returning home. While some governments are organizing return flights and covering fully or partially the related expenses, there have also been reports of people who remain stranded as they cannot afford the cost of traveling home, which may include the cost of the flight (bus, or other form of travel), required medical certificate indicating negative COVID-19 results and/or cost of accommodation including pre-departure quarantine.

In some situations, migrants remain stranded due to the temporary disruption of programmes such as Assisted Voluntary Returns and Reintegration (AVRR) due to mobility and/or quarantine measures put in place. Such situations of despair have led some migrants to return home through unofficial borders because the required costs, including medical certificates are too [high](#), as evident with Thai nationals returning from Myanmar. In some cases where flights were cancelled, and rescheduled, multiple tests were required as results had to be within a specified time frame, typically within a 48-hour or 72-hour period. This incurred additional expenses that many stranded abroad are unable to afford; including cost for new flights as the reimbursement for the cancelled ones was either delayed or not an option.

Migrants who are temporary visa or residence holders were faced with uncertainty related to their migratory status, which impacts their ability to stay and/or return to their countries of origin or residence respectively. Various capacity gaps have prevented some governments from providing effective immigration related assistance amidst the ongoing crisis, and numerous migrants still lack timely and accurate information, consular and visa processing support. In many countries, they face the risk of failing to maintain their legal status, which may have long-term consequences including future entry bans, through no fault of their own. More information about admission and stay measures is available through IOM's [Emerging Immigration, Consular and Visa Needs initiative](#) and accompanying Issue Briefs.

Movement issues are exacerbated by the [absence of cooperation dialogues](#) and means to find solutions between countries of origin, destination and transit. There are a number of countries with stranded migrants from countries of origin with whom legal, political, or operational dialogue and cooperation on return (and alternatives to return), readmission and reintegration are non-existent or insufficient. The lack of or insufficient implementation of existing return and readmission cooperation dialogues have, in some cases, aggravated and permeated the ad hoc and/or one-sided solutions to the regularization options or return modalities of stranded migrants of said nationalities. In turn, promoting dialogues and systematic cooperation between concerned governments could enhance the immediate and long-term solutions to stranded migrants.

[Migrant Vulnerabilities](#)

In addition to movement challenges, the [migratory status of migrants](#) also had a considerable impact on their situations. For example, temporary visa holders such as students and migrant workers living in countries like Australia, New Zealand, Qatar, the Russian Federation, Singapore, and South Africa have been reported to be living in precarious situations after losing their jobs due to COVID-19 mitigating measures and/or are without access to other financial support. Many are ineligible for government assistance due to their migratory status which has resulted in hundreds of individuals and families becoming destitute or experiencing extreme poverty and are at risk of becoming destitute. Many have had to rely on the charity of civil society organizations to support with some of their basic needs, such as food. However, such assistance has also been affected by the lack of financial support to many of these organizations.

Cases of [xenophobia, discrimination and stigmatization](#) have been reported. In some incidents, migrants were not allowed to enter hotels nor access supermarkets and restaurants or have been evicted from their hotels/apartments as they were stigmatized as major spreaders of the virus. Issues of discrimination are prevalent where migrants are believed to be carriers of the virus. This is also the case for migrants who returned to their countries of origin and experienced stigma as they were viewed as bringing the virus back with them. IOM has been continually monitoring these situations throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

[Movements and people at sea](#) face additional vulnerabilities owing to COVID-19 containment measures. Large numbers of maritime personnel (seafarers), including crew members of cruise ships and cargo vessels, fishermen and sailors, have been stranded at sea for months due to a combination of port closures, flight restrictions and travel bans. In addition to issues of working beyond expired contracts, mental health has been a concern as at least five cases of suicide among marine personnel were reported. The United Nations Secretary-General has called on all countries to consider marine personnel as key workers to allow them to disembark to enable the rotation of new crew members. For migrants stranded at sea (for example, in the Central Mediterranean) and unable to disembark due to policy changes and restrictions, access to health, hygiene and shelter has also been a major concern, in addition to the life-threatening situations they found themselves in.

[Migrants and people living in crowded shelters and camps or camp-like settings](#) face increasing health risks as COVID-19 cases continue to emerge in their cramped living quarters, which often include overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, poor nutrition, and limited access to health care facilities. Several COVID-19 cases have been reported in migrant and refugee camps in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and on Greek islands, in immigration centres in Germany and Malaysia, as well as in migrant settlements in Gulf Cooperation Council states and in Singapore. COVID-19 related deaths were reported in camps, including in Bangladesh and in immigration centres in the United States of America. People living in camp-like settings such as densely populated urban slums, informal settlements, or communal dormitories also face increased health risks due to the lack of or limited service provisions (for example, access to water), inadequate health infrastructure, and the difficulty of practicing physical distancing.

[Migrant workers \(in the formal and informal sector\) face additional hardship.](#) In addition to lack of access to health care and information on COVID-19 prevention, many migrant workers are at greater risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19. Crowded working conditions, workers living in communal worksite housing and continued operations of high-risk facilities amid the pandemic have been cited as factors contributing to spreading COVID-19 in many essential lines of work. Canada and Singapore reported large number of positive COVID-19 cases amongst migrant workers, including reports of deaths amongst these groups in countries such as Canada.

[Migrant fatalities.](#) Migrants' vulnerabilities and precarious situations may place them at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, resulting in individuals who succumbed to and died of the virus as a result

DATA COLLECTION MECHANISMS AND LIMITATIONS

Within this initiative, there are several mechanisms and sources used to capture data on the impact on migrants due to COVID-19 and its related measures:

- Media sources, including traditional news outlets with global, regional, and local coverage of events and social media platforms as hosts for links to related articles from trusted sources.
- Internal IOM sources include IOM's missions and offices, IOM humanitarian situation reports, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) reports on other related data collection and/or needs assessment activities⁵
- The Return Task Force database stores data on requests for needed assistance. As of 10 August, there were 151 requests for assistance for 113, 466 migrants. As a result of COVID-19 containment policies, an increased number of migrants and governments have approached IOM to support in organizing returns of migrants to their countries of origin as well as providing assistance with migrants' basic needs. In some cases, requests are spontaneously formulated by migrants; in others, they are coming directly from the government where migrants are stranded or from embassies or consulates of migrants' countries of origin.
- The Mobility Restrictions Monitoring /Points of Entry (MRM/PoE) Database maps and gathers data on the locations, status and different restrictions at Points of Entry (PoE), globally. The data collected through the mobility restriction monitoring (MRM) database is presented on <https://migration.iom.int/>.

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groups (migrants in transit to their countries of origin, stranded migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and nationals⁷) in need of assistance. Note that due to COVID-19, situations are rapidly changing and updates from country missions reflect the reality at that moment in time.

- Ad hoc internal IOM exercise to collect information on stranded migrants based on regional or missions-based data collection mechanisms. Such mapping exercises include both publicly available information and bilaterally-shared government-owned information and are compiled for internal use by missions, regional offices and/or Office of the Director General.

As noted previously, this initiative attempts to provide a general estimation of the number of stranded migrants and has so far recorded nearly 3 million stranded migrants whose intended movements were affected due to COVID-19. The breakdown per region is available below, and details of the data are included under the table. IOM country missions' inputs were key to establishing an estimate of migrants present in the regions and on estimates of migrants from their regions stranded abroad. Missions are best placed to have latest data, which are systematically entered and updated in the MRM/PoE database. Their inputs are the basis to establishing these estimates and ensure timely update as the situation evolves.

Table 1: Estimate of known cases of stranded migrants by IOM Region

IOM REGION	STRANDED MIGRANTS IN THE REGION
Asia and Pacific	976,869
European Economic Area and Switzerland	202,578
South America	37,484
Middle East and North Africa	1,257,053
West and Central Africa	5,503
East and Horn of Africa	2,509
Southern Africa	99,893
Central America, North America, Caribbean	111,384
South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Asia	58,181
Estimated Total	2,751,454

The data is as of 13 July 2020.

⁷ This paper does not include the last two categories.

Crucial considerations must be taken when reviewing the table and they include:

The tables above provide: An attempt to record known cases of migrants stranded abroad, from public or official sources and direct requests to IOM, in need of different types of assistance. It includes various categories such as migrants with reported needs of food, water, shelter and/or return assistance. It includes migrants that have been either identified by IOM missions and offices or migrants that have been referred to IOM for assistance by Governments including by Diplomatic and Consular offices, Civil Society partners, other UN agencies or which have approached IOM for assistance individually. It includes various population categories, irrespective of their legal status, that became stranded due to COVID-19 and/or are in need of some type of assistance. It is based on information that has become available to IOM – publicly, officially and/or unofficially.

The tables above do not provide: An estimation of all migrants stranded globally due to COVID-19, an official or publicly available statistic. It does not aim to provide an all-inclusive and comprehensive number of all population categories that were stranded due to COVID-19. It does not include populations reported as stranded, according to differing perspectives, prior to COVID-19. It does not include people already stranded pre-COVID-19, though it is acknowledged that they have also been impacted by the pandemic and they remain in vulnerable situations, with limited access to much needed support. It does not include the number of migrants that have returned – either spontaneously, through their own means or facilitated by Governments and/or International Organizations, when that was reported publicly – or the number of migrants initially tracked as stranded in a certain country and subsequently reported as returned, which have been, to the extent possible, updated in status in the MRM/PoE database. The tables do not include numbers of travellers back to their countries of origin. Information is to the extent possible related to migrants, but in the past months it has been difficult to isolate migrants from other travellers from the same nationality stranded in foreign countries. The table does not include the number of migrants in detention centres. Most of these other categories, not included in table of stranded migrants, are accounted separately. Finally, this table does not include information on internal migrants and IDPs, which are part of a separate workstream.

How to use the data: The data should be used with all above caveats in a manner that prevents any possible misrepresentation. The data should be used bearing in mind that due to evolving situations, the data does not represent nor fully encompass all cases of stranded migrants and that data presented is dependent on the capacity of IOM's country missions to provide insight into stranded migrants to the best of their abilities. The data should be used together indivisibly from the Issue Brief on COVID-19 and Stranded Migrants and the recommendations for actions included in it.

How the data can be improved: As an initiative focused on qualitative analysis, it does not attempt to provide an official count of how many are stranded abroad. However, this document can be the basis to support improvements and adjustments to existing data collection mechanisms to refine and develop further the quantitative data collected. The complexity and challenges of the COVID-19 crisis has impacted the abilities of IOM country missions and/or regional offices to engage consistently with the MRM/PoE database due to the diversity of issues that require humanitarian support. As such, increased resources to expand the capacity of missions and regional offices to fully engage with the MRM/PoE data can further enhance a better understanding of the number of stranded migrants.

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