

Addressing Refugee Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Future Ones

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Background Since the declaration of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on March 11, 2020, the lives of billions of people around the world have changed. Every country has scrambled to institute plans that could help slow the spread of COVID-19 among its population. At the same time, many governments have not yet created a response plan for vulnerable populations (for example, refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers) residing within their borders, leaving this population even more vulnerable than before.

Objective This review summarizes the current literature on refugee health in response to COVID-19 and other pandemics. It also highlights changes that need to occur in order to better assist this population.

Methods We conducted a systematic literature search using the main online databases (PubMed, Web of Science, Google Scholar) with the following keywords: 'COVID-19;' 'refugee health;' 'migrants;' 'refugee camps;' 'pandemic' 'asylum seekers;' 'infectious diseases;' 'displaced person;' and 'U.S. Detention Centers.' We included publications from 21 May 2009 to 17 July 2020 that focused on understanding refugee health in the context of pandemics including COVID-19. Relevant articles describing the impact of other infectious diseases pandemics on refugee health were also included in the literature search. Structured key informant interviews were completed with refugee patients, providers and other relevant stakeholders located in Aurora and Denver, CO, USA

Conclusion In order to slow the spread of COVID-19 and other easily-transmissible and deadly viruses such as influenza viruses that could lead to pandemics, protecting and ensuring access to adequate medical care of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants needs to be a critical component of the national and international pandemic preparedness and response plans. Importantly, national and local governments need to implement policies that allow this population to be fully incorporated into their respective national healthcare systems so they can access healthcare without fearing for their immigration status. Non-pharmacological interventions focused on reducing population density in refugee camps along with widespread institution of infection prevention interventions in order to stop the spread of COVID-19 in this population.