COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #13: Irregularity, protection & smuggling

Understanding the migration & mobility implications of COVID-19

These COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots are designed to capture the latest information and analysis in a fast-moving environment. Topics will be repeated from time to time as analysis develops. If you have an item to include, please email us at research@iom.int.

Public health governance and irregular migration

Poorly managed, inadequate or discriminatory immigration and health system responses can have multiple negative consequences for the health of migrants and the communities with which they interact.
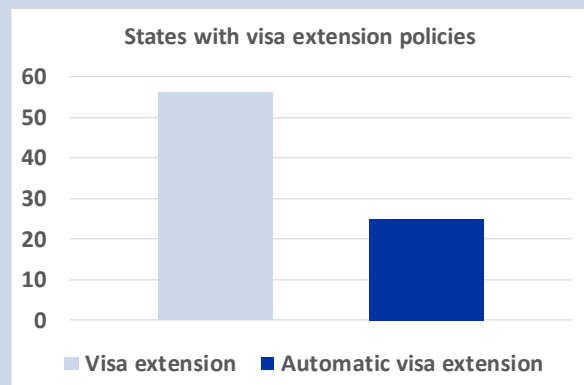
> *Migrants in irregular situations, asylum seekers, exploited and trafficked persons may be particularly at risk of COVID-19 because their living or working environment may expose them to the virus without necessary protection.*

—UN Special Rapporteurs Felipe González Morales and Maria Grazia Giammarinaro. Click here for the press briefing note.

Visa Extensions

Visa overstaying is among the primary pathways to irregularity. Recognizing the dilemma faced by millions of workers and other migrants holding soon-to-expire visas, over 20 countries have automatically extended visa validity periods. At least one country from every region of the world has implemented a visa extension policy in response to COVID-19.

States with visa extension policies

Legend: ■ Visa extension ■ Automatic visa extension

Source: Newland Chase; European Commission

Travel restrictions and smuggling

Even with the most recent travel bans and restrictions, some borders remain porous. As COVID-19 related travel restrictions continue to come into effect, there are growing fears that increasingly desperate people may turn to smugglers and some may even fall into the hands of human traffickers. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime released a publication that included information about changes in migrant smuggling operations that have occurred in response to COVID-19 measures. For example, early evidence in Niger suggests smugglers are moving toward more clandestine routes, which may also be more dangerous. On the Venezuela-Colombia border, officials have expressed concerns about migrants forced into making risky mobility decisions that include hiring organized smuggling operations following Colombia's decision to close many border checkpoints.

14 April 2020

Support to migrant workers with irregular status

Irregular migrant workers consistently have less support in place to ensure their continued employment and ensure proper protection from COVID-19, even in the labour industries which have been deemed "essential" by governments during lockdowns. Some articles/guides on vulnerabilities and policy responses to protect irregular migrant workers include:

⇒ Guidance for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis by IOM

⇒ ILO Standards and COVID-19 (coronavirus) FAQ: by the International Labour Organization

⇒ Living in fear during the COVID-19 crisis: migrant women with insecure immigration status and domestic violence by Cathy McIlwaine

Essential services access for migrants of irregular status

States, cities and civil-society organizations have taken measures to address disparities in access to essential services among irregular workers. Among these are:

⇒ Portugal has opened access to state support systems to asylum-seekers and irregular migrants.

⇒ New York City is providing many services to all residents regardless of status documentation.

⇒ GCIR, a consortium of civil-society organizations, foundations and private companies have organized resources for migrants with regular and irregular status in the United States.

Detention & deportation

Some countries have continued to detain and deport irregular migrants during the pandemic, despite the health risks and travel restrictions. A number of countries have started to release some irregular migrants from immigration detention. In other cases, judicial orders have been made for release due to COVID-19 infections in detention facilities.

Information Communication Technology and Smuggling

The use of technology, such as communication apps to share the latest information, including to support clandestine border crossings, has raised valid questions concerning the extent to which technology has been used to support irregular migration and smuggling, as well as to enable migrants to avoid abusive and exploitative migrant smugglers and human traffickers. ICTs have become even more central to migrant decision-making in the era of COVID-19, when public health information and misinformation can be easily spread via messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or WeChat.