

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.



Migrants' stigmatization and discrimination in crisis situations



Stigmatization of certain groups, such as migrants, during crisis situations is not new. From terrorism to diseases outbreaks, migrants have often been scapegoated for endangering native populations. Diseases have at times been perceived as “foreign”, as was the case, for instance, with cholera in the 1830s, HIV/AIDS in the 1980s or, more recently, with H1N1 influenza.

The COVID-19 pandemic makes no exception as individuals of Asian and European descent and migrants more generally have been stigmatized for spreading the virus. Instances of stigmatization have taken the form of verbal and/or physical assault and social and, sometimes, institutional exclusion from the receiving society. However, compared to previous diseases outbreaks, the issue of stigmatization seems to have received unprecedented attention given the scale of the pandemic, the clear guidance on its naming (from WHO), its media coverage and related commentary on political instrumentalization.



Misinformation, fake news and the instrumentalization of the COVID-19 pandemic

The stigmatization of migrants and instances of discrimination against them have been exacerbated by misinformation and fake news in the media, especially social media, and the politicization of the issue.

The pandemic has been exploited by anti-migrant, far-right and hate groups, with conspiracy theories circulating on the origin of the virus. While some have been claiming that COVID-19 is a bio-weapon or is linked to 5G connectivity, others have pointed to migration and migrants as the cause of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The stigmatization of migrants is here symptomatic of the overload of information on social media over which there is little control and which is instrumentalized for political and other interests.

Learning from the “Spanish” flu

One of the key lessons for COVID-19 from the so-called Spanish flu that engulfed the world in 1918 is highlighted in this article as being *how not to name a pandemic*. Despite not originating in Spain, it became known as the “Spanish” flu because the Spain was the first country to report it publicly. The name led to stigmatization and has continued to cause offence. In Spain it is known as the 1918 flu.

Risks stemming from migrants' stigmatization in the current COVID-19 pandemic

The stigmatization and discrimination of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic are not only harmful for migrants themselves, but also for the society as a whole.

On the short and medium terms, stigmatization and discrimination of migrants may run counter current responses to contain the virus outbreak and further [endanger](#) the health of populations. As noted by the [World Health Organization](#):

“ Stigma can:

- Drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination
- Prevent people from seeking health care immediately
- Discourage them from adopting healthy behaviours

On the longer term, stigmatization and discrimination may negatively impact on migrants' integration. This would not only undermine migrants' well-being, but more broadly that of receiving societies as [migrants' exclusion can more generally undermine social cohesion](#).



Click on the [photo](#) to watch a short video

“ Our greatest enemy right now is not the virus itself. It's fear, rumours and stigma. Our greatest assets are facts, reason and solidarity.

WHO Director General, [Opening remarks](#) at the media briefing on COVID-19, 28 February 2020



From discrimination to solidarity in face of COVID-19

The [World Health Organization](#) has provided some tips on countering stigmas. These include spreading the facts, engaging social influencers, amplifying voices, stories and images of those who have recovered from the virus or ensuring balanced media reporting disseminating evidence-based information.

While social media has been used to spread anxiety and hate, it has also served as a space to counter stigmatization and discrimination and display solidarity. A number of [hashtags](#) have gone viral on social media, such as #iamnotavirus launched by Chinese communities. Media outlets are also featuring [stories](#) of how migrants, including refugees, are supporting affected communities. Seven refugees in Italy have for instance managed [UNHCR Italy's Instagram account](#) during a week for spreading messages of responsibility in the face of the pandemic and solidarity.

This COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot has been produced by [IOM Research](#) (research@iom.int).

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