

World

Health threat to migrant workers revealed in new study

World's estimated 150m-strong labour force at high risk of injury and illness



Migrant workers prepare to pick grapes at a vineyard in Kent, Britain. Migrant workers fill gaps in labour markets that locals do not want to do, such as agricultural work in Europe or construction work in the Middle East © Reuters

Darren Dodd in London YESTERDAY

The world's estimated 150m migrant workers are at high risk of work-related injury and illness, according to a new study that illustrates for the first time the precarious and often dangerous nature of their working lives.

Migrant workers, who are more likely to be employed in low-wage and unsafe jobs than others in the labour force, experienced a range of physical and psychological problems in the countries where they are employed, according to the report published in [The Lancet](#). The problems are compounded because migrant workers often have limited access to health services and, in the case of undocumented workers, are excluded from health or insurance schemes.

“[Migrant workers] may experience significant occupational health issues and injuries in unskilled low-paid employment. However, they are largely ignored by policymakers and governments in the countries where they work,” said Sally Hargreaves, a lecturer in global health at St George's, University of London, and lead author of the study.

The report collected data from more than 12,000 migrant workers, originating from 25 countries, with unskilled and manual jobs. It found almost half had experienced

occupational health issues such as musculoskeletal pain and skin conditions, and 22 per cent had reported accidents and injuries including fractures, dislocations and falls.

To remedy this, the report recommended that restrictions on access to health services for migrants should be removed, while governments should urgently improve occupational health services, strengthen safety regulation and widen entitlement to statutory medical services and insurance.

“We are calling on governments to provide universal and equitable access to health services to all migrant populations,” Dr Hargreaves said. While the report covered a variety of injuries and illnesses affecting migrants, there were no comparable data on the number of work-related deaths, she added.

Migrant workers play a key role in the global economy, sending home [billions of dollars](#) each year, mostly to low-and middle-income countries. North America and Europe are the two biggest destinations for migrants seeking work.

Ivan Ivanov, team leader for occupational and workplace health at the World Health Organization, said they usually filled gaps in labour markets that locals did not want to do, such as agricultural work in Europe or construction work in the Middle East.

One problem was that while most migrant workers were legal, the question of healthcare did not usually form part of bilateral labour agreements under which they work, and they were rarely briefed on their rights to healthcare abroad before travelling to their new job, Dr Ivanov said. He praised the work of trade unions in the UK which had been effective in circulating multi-language material on workplace rights and occupational hazards.

Dr Hargreaves pointed out that even countries that scored well on general access to health services performed poorly when it came to migrant workers. For example, migrant workers in Europe are disproportionately affected by HIV/Aids, yet they are often denied access to [antiretroviral treatment](#) in their host countries.

Mental health problems among migrant workers already experiencing long hours, stress, isolation and depression are exacerbated by hostile employers and threats of deportation.

“Experiencing a different culture, a different language and a different climate brings enormous stresses,” Dr Ivanov said. Migrant workers also lacked social support and, as most save their earnings to send home, lived in cramped and inadequate housing.

Working conditions and hours can be brutal, especially in Gulf countries, said Dr Ivanov.

“Taking measures to protect migrant workers from the risk of being fired from their jobs is a

cent,” he added.

The WHO will discuss a plan to improve the health of refugees and migrants at the [World Health Assembly](#) in Geneva on Friday.

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