

Key Findings

- COVID-19 had an enormous impact on migration and migrants, not least as travel ground to a halt. Despite the lifting of most restrictions, the pandemic has had a transformative impact, and while human migration and mobility have rebounded considerably, they remain below 2019 levels for most of the world.
- The effects of COVID-19 on migrants were wide-ranging and profound, with 2.75 million global migrants stranded, many of whom were already in vulnerable or exploitative positions. Other impacts included loss of employment, falling into irregular status, detention or deportation, and an increase in xenophobic sentiments.
- There is great geographical diversity in levels of pandemic recovery. In less developed countries, mobility at the community level is recovering, as people need to move to work. In more developed countries, community mobility has declined, in part because the information and communications technology infrastructure enables remote work.
- International airline passenger numbers remain stubbornly below 2019 levels, especially in Europe and in Asia and the Pacific, where they are 25 per cent to 49 per cent lower. Many COVID-19-related restrictions on mobility remain in place, with international travel still tightly controlled in some world regions.
- Lower levels of migration and mobility sparked by the pandemic are having profoundly transformative effects in destination countries, with employers being forced to reduce their dependence on distant labour sources and invest more in automation and digital outsourcing, in which human labour is performed remotely at a lower cost.
- Despite predictions of a large drop, global remittances were down just 2.4 per cent on pre-pandemic levels, while greater digitalization led to migrants shifting from informal to formal channels. Remittances also took on added importance as COVID-19 affected humanitarian work, and people relied on family living in more stable circumstances.
- The digital transformation accelerated by COVID-19 prompted many people in high income countries to relocate away from cities, reversing a decades-long trend of urbanization. The rise in online work and working from home has meanwhile accelerated a trend of outsourcing tasks to workers in less developed countries.

- Long-term effects of COVID-19 which will impact future migration patterns include lower birth rates, increased inflation, economic slowdown, and a decline of health care and rising unemployment in less developed countries. Some of these factors may in future lead to people seeking better living conditions through migration.

Takeaway for Policy

COVID-19 took a heavy toll on migrants and migration worldwide. While the emergency phase of the pandemic has passed, there are long-term consequences for migration including a more restrictive policy landscape. This may seem counter-intuitive given the economic impact of a shortage of migrant labour in developed countries, but while employer groups in many destination countries lobby governments for increased immigration, many employers are increasingly having to turn to digital outsourcing and automation. The human impact of these COVID-19 transformations – especially in less developed countries – is likely to be profound.



The full chapter is available at <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-9>.



The WMR interactive platform can be accessed at <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/>.

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