

Key Findings

- COVID-19 has radically altered mobility, with 108,000 COVID-related international travel restrictions imposed globally in the first year of the pandemic. By early May 2020, the number of flights had decreased by about 80 per cent globally, and the estimated number of international migrants for 2020 was lower, by around 2 million, than otherwise would have been due to COVID-19.
- Migration was disrupted by many COVID-19 response aspects including border restrictions and closures, visa programme disruptions, quarantine measures, and no or limited flights. The impacts have been felt acutely in specific sectors, such as agriculture during harvest seasons, and global food supply chains have been disrupted.
- There was some shift in perceptions about migrant workers in the early stage of the pandemic. Low-paid and often undocumented workers became more visible as providers of essential services – including in the service industries and the care sector – and greater value was placed on their contribution to society.
- However, xenophobia and anti-Asian racism also rose worldwide, with some media, public figures, and political groups erroneously linking migrants to the spread of the virus. Hate and discrimination against migrants was exacerbated due to misinformation and fears associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Many migrant workers were particularly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 given that they were more likely to be in lower skilled and lower paid positions that placed them at risk of coming into contact with the virus, while more highly paid professionals had the ability to restrict their mobility.
- People needing to seek asylum or depart unstable countries were prevented from leaving, exposing them to the risk of violence, abuse, persecution and death. They were also increasingly unable to enter other countries to claim asylum, while many in host countries were housed in crowded accommodation (including migrant worker dorms or refugee camps), which increased risks of infection.

- Many migrant workers lost their jobs due to COVID-related reasons, but border closures prevented them from returning home, leaving large numbers of migrants stranded around the world, often without access to social protection. Others were stranded in transit countries, with repatriation operations complicated and often delayed.
- The intensification of reliance on digital solutions brought on by the pandemic, as governments, industry, communities and migrants themselves needed to adapt quickly to physical isolation and immobility, has presented challenges, but also demonstrable opportunities and efficiencies. It has also highlighted the so-called “digital divide”, with many people around the world unable to access the digital technologies needed to deal with immobility.
- While it is difficult to predict the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on migration, the resulting global economic downturn and intensification of digitalization will likely result in a decline in demand for international migrant workers over time, with profound implications for countries of origin that rely on international remittances from diaspora.

Takeaway for Policy

COVID-19 demonstrated the positive role migrant workers play in destination communities and economies, as they were often in the front line, providing essential services. This presents an opportunity to recognize this contribution through policy settings and related migrant support services, including to migrants who became stranded. COVID-19 also highlighted that migrants and diaspora were on the economic “front line” of the global response, providing essential funds to families and communities back home, and underscoring the critical need to reduce international remittance costs globally through effective policy and practice partnerships.



The full chapter is available at <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022-chapter-5>.



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

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