



LETTERS

COVID-19: MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Covid-19 and refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in Greece

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Douglas and colleagues correctly say that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants are vulnerable to epidemics.¹ Social distancing in the overcrowded places where they commonly reside is impossible, and early detection of cases is difficult owing to their exclusion from national healthcare plans. Local outbreaks among refugees and migrants are expected in epidemics, outbreaks that might go unchecked or even concealed.²

In the covid-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization, the UN Refugee Agency, and the International Organisation for Migration have repeatedly recommended that national health and disease surveillance systems integrate refugees and migrants. Concrete decongestion plans of camps need to be prioritised, and vulnerable people need to be moved to safe accommodation.^{2,3}

In Greece more than 60 000 refugees and migrants reside in 36 reception centres and camps, most of which run beyond their capacity, are overcrowded, and lack basic infrastructure—ideal environments for the spread of SARS-CoV-2.⁴ Early calls for the decongestion of these camps have remained unanswered by the Greek authorities.⁴

Three local outbreaks occurred in refugee camps on the Greek mainland between 2 April and 21 April.⁵ In all cases, detection of covid-19 clusters was accidental and late.

Covid-19 management in refugee camps remains under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum instead of the Ministry of Health. Early on, and lacking any evidence, refugees and migrants were stigmatised by government authorities as possible carriers of SARS-CoV-2, increasing public hostility and paving the way for the ongoing operational plan, which foresees the prolonged lockdown of all refugee and

migrant camps (compared with the general population) and the onsite quarantine of any confirmed cases.

Early introduction of social distancing and isolation measures has successfully controlled the first wave of covid-19 epidemic in Greece.⁵ Immediate decongestion of refugee camps, full integration of refugee care in the national healthcare plan, and effective epidemiological surveillance and contact tracing systems for the entire population are public health prerequisites for sustaining this success.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1557/rr-6>.

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