

Migrants and refugees face higher risk of developing ill-health, says UN report on displaced people in Europe

European authorities are “struggling” to meet the needs of irregular migrants and refugees who are wrongly accused of spreading sickness among host communities, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday, at the launch of its [first report](#) on the subject.

“The refugees and migrants that come to Europe, they do not bring any exotic diseases with them – any exotic communicable diseases,” said Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

“The diseases that they might have there are all well-established diseases in Europe, and also we have very good prevention and control programmes for these diseases,” she added. “This applies both for tuberculosis but also HIV/AIDS.”

Among other myths exposed as false by the [report](#) was the belief that more vulnerable people were arriving in Europe than was the case.

“International migrants make up about 10 per cent of the population in the European Region, that is about 90 million,” Dr. Jakab noted. “Out of this, less than 7.4 per cent are refugees and in some of the European countries, citizens estimate that there are three or four times more migrants than there are in reality.”

Based on a review of more than 13,000 documents on the health of refugees and migrants in the WHO European Region – one of six regions globally – the organization’s report provides a snapshot of their situation, at a time of rising global migration.

It shows that they are at higher risk of developing ill-health than host populations.

Citing UN migration agency ([IOM](#)) data indicating that more than 50,000 migrants and refugees have died in the Mediterranean area since the year 2000, the WHO report notes how women, young men, adolescents and unaccompanied minors are often “victims of deceptive recruitment and modern slavery”.

This has a grave physical and mental impact on the victims, it warns, adding that these this has “health repercussions” on their families and communities.

By way of an example, although displaced populations are at lower risk for all forms of cancer, except cervical cancer, the disease is “more likely to be diagnosed at an advanced stage”, the report says, putting them at greater risk of “considerably worse health outcomes than those of the host

population”.

Diabetes also affects refugees and migrants more than host communities, the WHO report continues, with “higher incidence, prevalence and mortality rate”, especially among women.

Other illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, tend to affect refugees and migrants more than European host communities, the WHO study continues, noting that this applies particularly to unaccompanied minors, who also suffer higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Migrants and refugees are also at a greater risk from developing infectious diseases because of lack of access to health care, interrupted care and poor living conditions while on the move, according to the WHO report.

“I don’t think that in most of the countries the illegal migrants have access to the health system services,” Dr. Jakab said. “So that is an area where we have to do substantial additional work and conviction of the countries, because, the best way to protect their own population and the refugees is to give them access.”

WHO’s European Region covers 53 countries and has a combined population of almost 920 million people; the proportion of international migrants varies from more than 50 per cent in Andorra and Monaco, to less than two per cent in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Poland and Romania.

Providing rights-based healthcare systems that are sensitive to the needs of migrants and refugees is included in the [2030 Agenda](#), which covers 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#), known as the ‘SDGs’ and targets including universal health coverage.

Of 40 European States that responded to a WHO survey on the progress they are making towards healthcare systems that take into account the needs of refugees and migrants, only one in two said that they had conducted at least one assessment of the needs of migrants and refugees.

“The illegal migrants are not ‘visible’ to the authorities, so to say,” Dr. Jakab said. “They are there in the country but formally and officially the countries are not aware that they are present in the country.”

Globally, there are an estimated 258 million migrants, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.