

Perspectives on Access to Healthcare for African Asylum Seekers in Israel During the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic: A Qualitative Study



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Introduction

Israel hosts approximately 31,122 asylum-seekers, most of them from Sudan and Eritrea. Asylum seekers in Israel are systematically excluded from nationally-available social benefits and civil liberties.

Prior to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, asylum-seekers encountered significant barriers accessing healthcare, however it is not known how COVID-19 affected the provision of healthcare for this population. We conducted a qualitative study of frontline providers and community representatives to investigate experiences and perceptions of healthcare for asylum-seekers in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study Objectives

- Describe barriers to healthcare access for African asylum-seekers residing in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Outline gaps in healthcare access for African asylum-seekers residing in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Evaluate challenges and successes of interventions to provide healthcare services to African asylum-seekers residing in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic

Methodology

16 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of frontline providers representing different key-informant groups (public health officials, clinicians, asylum-seeker community leaders, social workers, case workers) and 9 non-governmental organizations serving asylum-seekers. Interviews were conducted in English and Hebrew, audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Thematic consensus was achieved with all members of the research team.

Study participants:

- 31% NGO staff
- 25% Asylum seeker community leaders
- 25% Clinicians
- 13% Public health professionals
- 6% Social workers

Figure 1: Non-governmental organizations interviewed

NGOs Represented (n=10)
Hotline
Jerusalem African Community Center
Physicians for Human Rights Israel
Negev Refugee Center
Ruth Clinic
African Refugee Development Center – Israel
Social Clinic, Sheba Medical Center at Tel HaShomer
ALEF - the Organisation for Refugees in Haifa
Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel (ASSAF)
African Students Organization – Israel

Figure 2: Methodology of qualitative data collection and analysis



Results

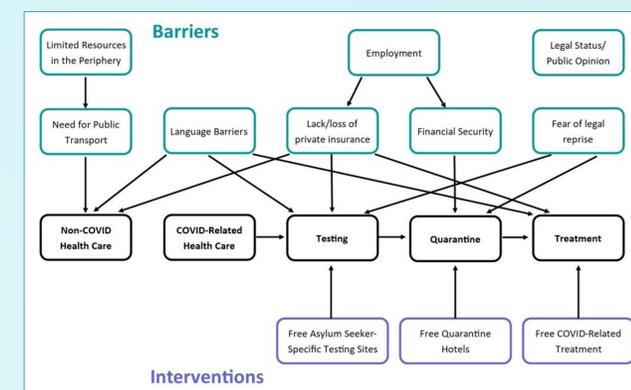
Seven major themes described how the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing barriers for asylum-seekers. Loss of employment led to:

- ineligibility for care through Israel's universal healthcare system,
- worsening of pre-existing conditions due to loss of insurance, and
- socioeconomic stress and crowded living conditions.

Other barriers included:

- fear of loss of temporary visa status and refoulement,
- limited healthcare services in Israel's geographic periphery accessible to asylum-seekers,
- reliance on overburdened non-governmental healthcare services, and
- limited availability of linguistically appropriate COVID-19 resources and healthcare.

Figure 3: Barriers to healthcare during COVID-19 pandemic experienced by asylum seekers and outside interventional policies



Conclusion

Despite government measures to provide COVID-19 specific healthcare for asylum-seekers, a variety of barriers for both COVID-19 and routine healthcare needs exist. As a result, asylum-seekers are at risk for poor health outcomes. Actions should be taken to promote inclusion of asylum-seekers into existing healthcare structures.

“Like many other things, COVID-19 is a mirror reflecting previous structural problems - similar barriers, but more acute.”

- Local public health professional