

COVID-19 and Immigrant Essential Workers: Bhutanese and Burmese Refugees in the United States

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Immigrants are believed to be at high risk of infection with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, the virus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). A leading suspected risk factor is their role in the essential workforce. We aimed to describe COVID-19-related risk factors among Bhutanese and Burmese refugees in the United States. We administered an anonymous online survey in May 2020 among community leaders of Bhutanese and Burmese refugees. Using a snowball sampling strategy, we invited community leaders to complete the survey and share the link with others who met inclusion criteria (English proficient, aged ≥ 18 , currently living in the United States). We compared respondents with and without recent COVID-19 and identified risk factors for infection. Of 218 refugees in 23 states who completed the survey from May 15 through June 1, 2020, fifteen (6.9%) reported infection with COVID-19. Being an essential worker during the pandemic (odds ratio [OR] = 5.25; 95% CI, 1.21-22.78), having an infected family member (OR = 26.92; 95% CI, 5.19-139.75), and being female (OR = 5.63; 95% CI, 1.14-27.82) were risk factors for infection. Among 33 infected family members, 23 (69.7%) were essential workers. Although we had a small snowball sample, we found that working in essential industries was associated with an increased risk of COVID-19 infection among Bhutanese and Burmese refugees. We call for larger studies that include Asian immigrant subgroups, as well as immediate attention to protecting immigrant essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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