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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