

# Immigrants and COVID-19 Travel Restrictions<sup>1</sup>

Young-ook JANG, Associate Research Fellow, Europe Team, Advanced Economies Department (yojang@kiep.go.kr)

## I. Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrants

The COVID-19 pandemic has had enormous impact on all aspects of life around the world, of which immigrant and immigration were no exception. Travel controls and border closures have affected the mobility and living conditions of immigrants, making them vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. There are several reasons why immigrants are more susceptible to infection than the natives. First, they are involved more in international travel, which has been the major channel of COVID-19 transmissions. Second, immigrants have little information available as to disease prevention practices, especially in the initial phases of a pandemic, often due to a language barrier. Third, immigrant workers tend to have poorer living conditions susceptible to the spread of infectious diseases. Last, many immigrants work as key workers such as care workers, domestic workers, clean-

ers, drivers, nurses, etc., who had to continue working during the time of lockdown (Fasani and Mazza 2020).

It has indeed been observed that the proportion of infection and death among migrants is higher than natives. Table 1 shows that in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Portugal and Canada, the proportion of immigrants among confirmed cases was 1.5 to 2 times greater than the proportion of immigrants in the total population. For example, in Sweden, only about 19% of the total population are immigrants, but they account for 32% of the confirmed cases. Also, COVID-19 was more fatal to immigrants. In March and April 2020, during the first COVID-19 wave, migrants accounted for up to 17% of all deaths in France and Sweden, while the proportion of immigrants among deaths remained at 12-13% in the previous years (OECD 2020, 10).

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a summary article based on the fourth chapter of Jang et al. (2021).

**Table 1. The Share of Immigrants among the Infected and Total Population**

Location	Share of immigrants	
	Among the infected	Among total population
Sweden	32%	19%
Denmark	18%	9%
Norway	31%	16%
Portugal (Lisbon)	24%	11%
Canada (Ontario)	43.5%	25%

Source: OECD (2020. 10)

Immigrants were not only more vulnerable to infections, but also subject to harsher economic loss. In many OECD countries, the decline in employment rates among foreigners was greater than those among natives (OECD 2020. 10). In the agricultural sector, where the labor supply largely relies on seasonal workers from abroad, border controls caused labor shortage and resulted in deterioration of welfare for both workers and employers. For example, approximately 300,000 workers enter Germany as seasonal workers during the normal harvest season, but only 80,000 were able to enter the country while entry restrictions were applied due to COVID-19 (Heikkila, 2020). Similarly, Sweden, Norway and Finland also had difficulties in supplying seasonal workers (OECD 2020). Finally, the decline in the remittance from immigrants shows that there has been a decline in income. In 2020, the magnitude of global remittances is expected to decrease by more than 100 billion dollars (Quinn 2020). This has also hit families of immigrants in the sending country, who live on remittances.

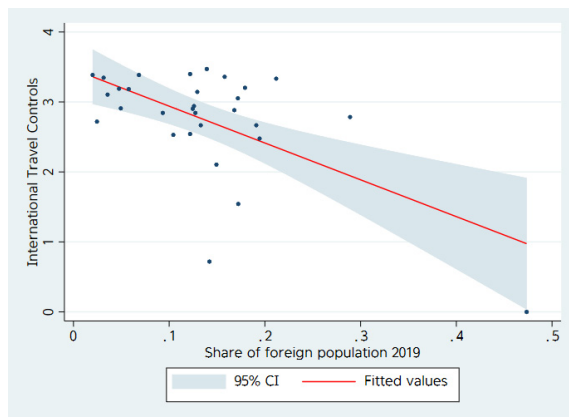
<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the dataset, see Hale et al. (2021)

## II. Share of Immigrants and Travel Restrictions

As immigrants have suffered disproportionately during the COVID-19 pandemic, the host countries which rely on immigrant workers also had to pay a price for entry restrictions and border closures. The example of labor shortage in the agricultural sector shows that the damage to migrants also affects national economies. In other words, the higher the dependence on immigrants, the greater the cost of border closures to the national economy. Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that countries with a larger share of foreign workers will find it more difficult to enforce strong entry restrictions even in the time of pandemic.

Figure 1 shows the correlation between the share of immigrants and the level of COVID-19 travel controls in 30 European countries. The share of immigrants in 2019 is used as a proxy variable for the dependance of a host economy on foreign workers. To gauge the strength of travel restrictions, a dataset of Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) is adopted.<sup>2</sup> The intensity of entry restrictions is expressed on a scale of 0 to 4, where 0 is for no measures, 1 for screening of inbound travelers, 2 for quarantine of travelers from high-risk areas, 3 for ban on arrivals from specific areas, and 4 for total border closure. In this analysis, the average value of the strength of entry restrictions between March 1, 2020 and August 1, 2020 was used.

**Figure 1. Correlation between Share of Immigrants and Travel Controls**



Source: Jang et al. (2021)

It is clearly shown in Figure 1 that the higher the proportion of foreigners rises, the weaker the intensity of entry restrictions becomes. For example, in Luxembourg, where the proportion of foreigners is close to 50%, no entry restrictions were taken during the first five months of the pandemic. This implies that the hypothesis about the impact of immigrant-dependence on policy-making may hold true.

For more rigorous empirical analysis, Jang et al. (2021) conducted multivariate cross-sectional regressions using data from 180 countries. This report uses reduced-form specifications as follow:

$$\begin{aligned} TravelControls_i & \\ &= a_1 + a_2 ShareForeign_i \\ &+ a_3 CasePerMil_i + X'\beta + \varepsilon_i \end{aligned}$$

$TravelControls_i$  denotes an index measuring the strength of entry restrictions in country  $i$ , and  $ShareForeign_i$  denotes the proportion of the foreign population living in the country immediately before the outbreak of COVID-19.

Another major explanatory variable is the number of confirmed cases per million population ( $CasePerMil_i$ ). The intensity of quarantine measures, including entry restrictions, is likely to be affected by the magnitude of infection waves.  $X$  refers to a set of control variables that could affect the strength of entry restrictions in addition to the proportion of foreign population and the size of COVID-19 outbreak. This includes population density, national income, median age, proportion of the population aged 65 and over, life expectancy, proportion of the poor population, and the number of beds per 1,000 population.

The initial results were mixed. When analyzing European countries only, the proportion of foreigners is found to have a significant correlation with the strength of entry restrictions. And the results do not change much when the number of confirmed cases or other control variables are included. However, when the analysis is extended to countries outside Europe, the significance of the regression coefficient of  $ShareForeign_i$  disappears. This implies that the relationship between the share of foreigners and the level of entry restrictions is observed only in Europe, possibly due to Europe-specific characteristics.

Jang et al. (2021) pays attention to the high level of income in Europe relative to other countries. While it is true that the cost of entry restrictions increases when the proportion of the foreign population is high, the damage caused by the spread of infection, which is likely to be exacerbated with open borders, is

not small either. If a country has other means to stop the spread of infection besides entry restrictions, the need for entry restrictions is reduced. For example, large-scale diagnostic tests, tracking/isolation systems, and medical capabilities for treatment can be used as substitutes for entry restrictions. These alternatives are expected to be well established in high-income countries such as those in Europe. In other words, high-income countries with a high proportion of foreigners have low need for entry restrictions, whereas low-income countries with a high proportion of foreigners have no choice but to introduce entry restrictions. To test this idea, Jang et al. (2021) introduced an interaction term, which is the share of foreign population multiplied by the income level

dummy for each country.

Table 2 reports that only the coefficient of the interaction term between the proportion of foreigners and high-income countries (HICs) is significant. The correlation between the share of immigrants and the level of entry restrictions is not observed for high- and middle-income countries (HIMC) and low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), as predicted. The coefficient of the interaction term for HIC remains significant when case number (Columns 2), other control variables (Column 3), and continent fixed effects (Column 4) are included in order. The case number turns out to be correlated with the intensity of overall measures but not with the entry restrictions (Jang et al. 2021, p.138).

**Table 2. Regression Results**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Share Foreign × HIC	-0.631* (0.333)	-0.677* (0.395)	-3.778*** (1.327)	-4.027*** (1.517)
Share Foreign × HIMC	1.685 (1.282)	1.774 (1.325)	1.009 (1.923)	1.103 (1.960)
Share Foreign × LMIC	2.633 (2.647)	2.629 (2.711)	-1.692 (4.627)	-1.382 (4.768)
Confirmed cases		-0.015 (0.031)	-0.023 (0.047)	-0.011 (0.056)
Constant	3.605*** (0.070)	3.709*** (0.181)	5.349*** (1.836)	5.280** (2.006)
Controls	X	X	0	0
Continent FE	X	X	X	0
R <sup>2</sup>	0.027	0.031	0.084	0.069
Observations	179	169	102	102

Notes: Dependent variable is the level of border controls; standard errors are in parentheses; the baseline for interaction terms is low-income countries; HIC: high-income countries, HIMC: high- and middle-income countries, LMIC: low- and middle-income countries; \* p<0.10. \*\* p<0.05. \*\*\* p<0.010

### III. Policy implications

As seen above, the outbreak of COVID-19 and following quarantine measures not only hindered immigration itself, but also aggravated the suffering of immigrants. Countries that are highly dependent on foreign workers have had difficulties in supplying labor due to entry restrictions and lockdowns. This cost could be alleviated by easing entry restrictions and placing other measures which are deemed more efficient. Therefore, it is necessary to develop policies to minimize negative effects on immigration and immigrants, while controlling epidemic waves at the same time.

EU and OECD member countries have placed several measures on this purpose (European Migration Network, 2021). They have changed procedures for entry and residence permit online, allowing migration even when face-to-face services were suspended. Some measures have been introduced to extend the right of migrants to stay in the host country during the period of travel restrictions. EU member states and Norway have taken steps to automatically extend residence permits, condone overstay, waive departure obligations, suspend procedures or extend deadlines. In the United States, from March 2020, online applications for extension of stay have been made available. In addition, OECD member states have also made assistance available for the immigrant job seekers and those who need medical services related

to COVID-19.

Some alternative measures need to be developed to minimize border closures and thus the cost of entry restrictions to immigrants and national economy. One alternative is the commonly used social distancing policies such as limiting public gatherings or gathering size, business closing, remote-work recommendation, and school closing. However, these measures are also costly and more cost-effective means, e.g. 3T strategy (test, trace/isolate, and treatment) should be adopted. Efficient epidemic control became possible with the initiation of vaccination.

Immigration control at the border is still essential to reduce the damage caused by COVID-19 variants introduced through international travel. More effective policy intervention than an extreme form of border closure is needed. The government of South Korea, for example, has been implementing Special Entry Procedure (SEP), for travelers arriving from high-risk areas since January 2020. The purpose of SEP is early detection of infectious diseases inflow and prevention of the spread of the disease in the local community, by strengthening inspection and self-isolation of inbound travelers. Although there is still 10-14 days of self-isolation period, SEP has an advantage over total border closure in that it allows those who enter the country for work, education or family reunion and minimize the cost caused by blocking them. **KIEP**

## References

- European Migration Network. 2021. The impact of COVID-19 in the migration area in EU and OECD countries. EMN OECD Umbrella Inform, April 30.
- Fasani, F. and J. Mazza. 2020. Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contribution to Europe's COVID-19 Response (No. 13178). Institute of Labor Economics (IZA).
- Hale, T., N. Angrist, R. Goldszmidt, B. Kira, A. Petherick, T. Phillips, S. Webster, E. Cameron-Blake, L. Hallas, S. Majumdar and H. Tatlow. 2021. "A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker)." *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5, 529-538.
- Heikkila, E. 2020. "Foreign seasonal migrants in agriculture and COVID-19." *Migration Letters*, 17(5), 563-567.
- Jang, Y., D. Joe, H. Lee and M. Jeong. 2021. The socioeconomic impact of immigration: Cases of the African immigrants in Europe and the response to Covid-19 pandemic. Studies in Global and Regional Strategies, KIEP. (in Korean)
- OECD. 2020. What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrants and their children? OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). October 19.
- Quinn, D. 2020. Sharp decline in remittances expected in 2020 amid COVID-19 lockdowns in top sending nations. June 22. Pew Research Center. (Retrieved on May 3, 2022 from <https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/22/sharp-decline-in-remittances-expected-in-2020-amid-covid-19-lockdowns-in-top-sending-nations/>)