

ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES

Human-induced climate change is expected to contribute to even greater population movements in the coming decades. Forecasts of the number of people who will migrate by mid-century in response to the effects of climate change are controversial, and vary from tens of millions to 250 million people.



La Trobe University's Dr Celia McMichael, School of Social Sciences, and researchers emphasise in a new review that health will be a critical concern regarding climate-related migration.

'There has been little research on the consequences of climate-related migration and the health of people who move. Climate change is projected to cause substantial increases in population movement in coming decades.

'Migrations are expected to occur primarily within countries or regions, although some will cross international boundaries; whether they are permanent or short term will depend on the events that prompt them,' says Dr McMichael.

'Extreme weather events such as floods, hurricanes, and heat waves typically lead to short-term internal movement, but slow-onset changes such as land degradation or rising sea levels may force populations to make permanent moves.'

In the review, researchers examined the health implications of three types of movements likely to be induced by climate change including: forcible displacement by climate impacts,

resettlement schemes and migration as an adaptive response.

'This risk assessment draws on research into the health of refugees, migrants, and people in resettlement schemes as analogues of the likely health consequences of climate-related migration.

'Climate-change-related migration is likely to result in adverse health outcomes, both for displaced and for host populations, particularly in situations of forced migration,' says Dr McMichael.

'However, where migration and other mobility are used as adaptive strategies, health risks are likely to be minimised, and in some cases there will be health gains.'

According to the researchers purposeful and timely policy interventions can facilitate the mobility of people, enhance wellbeing and maximise social and economic development in both places of origin and places of destination.

'Although the range and extent of health risks associated with future climate related population movements cannot be clearly foreseen, the evidence of health outcomes of analogous movements of people indicates that health risks will predominate over health benefits. This, then, is an issue of considerable geopolitical, ethical, and economic importance,' says Dr McMichael.

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