

Difficult working conditions of migrant workers: An example of an industrial area in south of Türkiye

Göçmen işçilerin zorlu çalışma koşulları: Türkiye'nin güneyinde bir sanayi bölgesi örneği

Onur ACAR¹ , Burak KURT² , Orhan Alper KOYU³ , Muhsin AKBABA⁴ , Ersin NAZLICAN⁵ , Hüseyin İLTER⁶ , Erhan KAYA⁷ , Musa ŞAHİN⁸ 



doi.org/10.35237/estudamhds.1563793

Abstract

The integration of refugees into their work lives is crucial issue for public health. This study aimed to reveal some characteristics of the working life of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. This cross-sectional study employed the convenience sampling method to select participants in one of the provinces in Türkiye that hosts the highest number of refugees compared to its population. The data collected via a questionnaire were analyzed using the Chi-square, t test, One-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation statistical methods. All the Syrian workers surveyed were unregistered, and 42.8% worked in the industry. Average weekly working hours were 66.2 hours, and 78.1% of the workers were paid less than the legal minimum wage. Weekly working hours or a high level of education did not lead to an increase in salary. The Syrian refugees changed jobs frequently due to poor working conditions, and 57.2% had a work accident in Türkiye. Syrian workers have been found to have adverse working conditions, including long working hours, low pay, lack of vocational training and a high risk of work accidents. It is recommended to carry out further studies together with the necessary arrangements.

Keywords: Refugees, migrant workers, occupational health, working conditions, work accident

Özet

Göçmenlerin iş hayatlarına entegrasyonu halk sağlığı için çok önemli bir konudur. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de geçici koruma altındaki Suriyeli işçilerin çalışma hayatına ait özelliklerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamıştır. Kesitsel tipte olan bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de nüfusa oranla en fazla Suriyeli göçmeni barındıran illerden birinde kolayda örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak katılımcılar seçilmiştir. Anket yoluyla toplanan veriler, Ki-kare, t testi, Tek yönlü ANOVA ve Pearson korelasyon istatistiksel yöntemleri ile analiz edilmiştir. Ankete katılan Suriyeli çalışanların tamamı kayıtsız çalışmakta olup, %42,8'i sanayide çalışmaktadır. Haftalık ortalama çalışma süresi 66,2 saat olup, işçilerin %78,1'i yasal asgari ücretin altında maaş almaktadır. Haftalık çalışma saatleri veya yüksek eğitim seviyesi, maaş artışına yol açmamıştır. Suriyeli işçilerin, kötü çalışma koşulları nedeniyle sık sık iş değiştirmiş ve %57,2'si Türkiye'de iş kazası geçirmiştir. Suriyeli çalışanların, uzun çalışma saatleri, düşük ücret, mesleki eğitim eksikliği ve yüksek iş kazası riskini içeren olumsuz çalışma koşullarına sahip olduğu görülmüştür. Gerekli düzenlemeler ile birlikte İleri çalışmaların yapılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mülteciler, göçmen işçiler, iş sağlığı, çalışma Koşulları, iş kazası

ESTUDAM Public Health Journal.
2025;10(1):42-9.

- 1-Bursa Orhangazi District Health Directorate, Bursa, Türkiye.
- 2-Ankara University Faculty of Medicine Department of Public Health, Ankara, Türkiye.
- 3-Ankara Haymana District Health Directorate, Ankara, Türkiye.
- 4-Retired faculty member.
- 5-Çukurova University Faculty of Medicine, Department of Public Health, Adana, Türkiye.
- 6-Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Public Health, Kırşehir, Türkiye.
- 7-Sutcu Imam University Faculty of Medicine, Department of Public Health, Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye.
- 8-Adana Provincial Health Directorate, Adana, Türkiye.

Sorumlu Yazar /

Corresponding Author:

Uzm. Dr. Onur ACAR
e-posta / e-mail:
dronuracar@yandex.com

Geliş Tarihi / Received:

09.10.2024

Kabul Tarihi / Accepted:

13.12.2024

Introduction

People who leave their own country and seek asylum in a foreign country because they are afraid of being persecuted are called refugees (1). The number of refugees who started to migrate to Türkiye in 2011 because they were forced to leave their country due to the civil war in Syria or worried that they would be persecuted in their country has reached 3.76 million today (2). The fulfillment of refugee rights defined by international conventions and national laws and the process of integrating these refugees into society have led to an emergency that affects every aspect of society (3–5). Although refugees' fundamental rights and freedoms are legally protected, they may experience difficulties accessing some of their rights due to the language barrier, cultural differences, the challenging adaptation process, social exclusion, under-qualification, and similar sociological dynamics.

One of the challenges experienced by refugees is access to the labor market. Working in a paid job provides refugees with income and the opportunity to establish social relations and improve self-esteem (6). In Türkiye, the work permits of Syrian refugees (SR) under the temporary protection regime have allowed them to give protection on a momentary and renewable ground to those falling outside the toughly interpreted international law refugee definition (7,8). However, refugees generally work informally in more physically intensive, long-term, and shift jobs in the place where they migrate, with lower wages compared to the country's domestic workforce (9). These jobs are dirty and dangerous jobs requiring no qualifications (10). Although working life positively contributes to physical and mental health, the occupational environment can also harm health due to its dangers. Considering the disadvantages of refugees, such as

the language barrier in the labor market, lack of occupational safety culture, unregistered employment, long working hours, and working in dangerous jobs, it can be said that refugees have an increased possibility of experiencing physical and mental health problems. Studies on refugees in working life and the difficulties they experience are essential for decision-makers to develop policies that may facilitate the integration of refugees into society and working life (3).

Children are the most vulnerable refugee group. They face poverty in the country they migrate to and have to enter working life. Child labor is an obstacle to reaching their potential and can harm their physical, mental, moral, and social development (11–13). Yet, 66.1% of 15-year-old male SRs in Türkiye are included in the labor market. There may be multiple reasons for this. For example, refugees cannot continue their education and are expected to contribute to the family budget as parents earn less than the minimum wage (3). According to the records of the Ministry of National Education, when our study was conducted, 290.403 of approximately 625.000 Syrian refugee children attended school in Türkiye (14). These rates show that refugee children who cannot be integrated into education can be integrated into the labor market as child workers.

Aim of the Study

This study was conducted to investigate the working conditions of SRs living in the southern city, Türkiye, and to analyze the problems they faced.

Research Questions

- What are the sociodemographic characteristics of SR workers?
- Are there any SR child workers?
- What are the lines of work in which SR workers are most employed?
- Are SM workers' rights regarding working conditions enforced?

ORCID:

Onur ACAR:
0000-0003-3561-3192,
Burak KURT:
0000-0002-8185-2146,
Orhan Alper KOYU:
0000-0003-1755-8863,
Muhsin AKBABA:
0000-0003-3028-6698,
Ersin NAZLICAN:
0000-0002-1460-1996,
Hüseyin İLTER:
0000-0002-4452-8902 ,
Erhan KAYA :
0000-0001-7458-3024,
Musa ŞAHİN:
0000-0002-0736-2229

Nasıl Atf Yapırım /

How to Cite:

Acar O, Kurt B, Koyu OA, Akbaba M, Nazlıcan E, İter H, Kaya E, Şahin M. Difficult working conditions of migrant workers: an example of an industrial area in south of Türkiye. ESTUDAM Public Health Journal.2025;10(1):42-9.

-What are the number and severity of occupational accidents SR workers have?

Material and Method

Research Setting

This study is a descriptive and cross-sectional study. The study was conducted in a southern city, Türkiye. The survey was conducted in the Small Industrial Area in the southern city.

Target Population and Research Sample

The study's target population was the SR workers in the Small Industrial Area in the southern city. In this industrial area, 6130 workers worked in food, iron and steel, forest, chemical, paper, and textile industries (15). The number of registered Syrians living in the province was 457,000, and the ratio of the Syrian population to the provincial population was 29.4% (16). Using the EpiInfo 7 program, the study sample was calculated as 301 people with a study population of 6130 workers, an expected frequency of 29%, a confidence interval of 95%, and a margin of error of 5%. Due to the difficult conditions of the study group, the study sample was relatively low compared to the minimum sample size required. Using the convenience sampling method, 201 (67%) people were reached and included in the study. A questionnaire form was prepared to be used during the face-to-face interviews. The interviews were held between 15 December 2017 and 15 January 2018.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected by the team of researchers and a translator by asking the questions in the questionnaire form to the SR workers who were under temporary protection and who worked in the Small Industrial Area. The data were collected using the face-to-face interview technique. The questionnaire included sociodemographic characteristics, job and working environment characteristics, vocational training and medical examinations, work accidents, and the use of personal protective equipment. The questions were posed to the participants in the workplace with the help of a translator. Each interview took about 20 minutes.

Research Variables

Independent variables:

- Age
- Level of Education
- The sector they work in
- Duration of working at the current workplace
- Weekly working hours
- Job-related training status
- The place where job-related training is received

Dependent variables:

- Occupational accident status
- Duration of working at the current workplace
- Weekly working hours
- Monthly salary

Ethical Considerations

Before the study, permission was obtained from the Çukurova University Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee (Decision no: 21 / Date: 01 December 2017) and Local Public Health Directorate.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25.0, IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) program was used in the analysis of the data. The conformity of the variables in the study to normal distribution was evaluated with the Shapiro-Wilks normality test. Descriptive statistical methods (number, percentage, mean, standard deviation, median) were used in the analysis. Normally distributed measurement values were analyzed with parametric methods. Independent-sample t-test was used to evaluate the means of two independent groups and One-Way ANOVA test was used to compare the measurement values of more than two independent groups. In the analysis of categorical variables, distribution difference, and odds ratio were obtained using the Chi-square test and risk coefficient. Pearson correlation was used to reveal the relationship between quantitative variables showing normal distribution. Data were evaluated at a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Results

Of the 201 SR workers in the study, 93% were male, 69.2% were married, and 39.3% were primary school graduates. The mean age of the participants was 30.8 ± 10.3 years, and 9.5% were younger than 18 years old. The age and educational status of the

participants have presented in Table 1. 99.5% of the participants lived outside the refugee camps, and

25.4% received social assistance from national-international organizations.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of Syrian workers

Parameters	n	%
Gender		
Male	187	93.0
Female	14	7.0
Age		
11-17	19	9.5
18-27	58	28.8
28-37	85	42.3
38-47	21	10.4
48-57	15	7.5
58 and older	3	1.5
Education Status		
Illiterate	2	1.0
Literate	42	20.9
Primary School	79	39.3
High School	32	15.9
College and above	46	22.9
Total	201	100.0

The participants mostly worked in the industry (42.8%), service (24.9%), and construction (20.4%) sectors. 96.5% of the participants were workers, while 3.5% were in administrative positions. The average duration of working at the current workplace was 10.6 ± 16.0 months at the time of the study. 27.9% worked in the same place for 12 months or less, and 30.3% worked in the same place for 13-24 months. The average weekly working hours was 66.2 ± 10.3 hours. 96.5% worked over 45 hours, the legal maximum weekly working time.

All the participants worked without a work permit and social security insurance. Their average salary was 306 ± 118 USD, and 78.1% earned less than the legal minimum wage of 370 USD at the time of the study. 64.2% of the participants wanted to change their job or workplace due to poor

working conditions (65.9%), low salary (15.5%), high risk of work accident (11.6%), poor relations with supervisors (6.2%), and insufficient social assistance (0.8%).

83.1% of the participants reported receiving training in Türkiye or Syria related to their job. 75.6% of participants received this training through the informal master-apprentice relationship. 56.3% of the participants who received training related to their job stated that it was sufficient. None of the participants had a periodic health examination during the working period. 65.2% of the participants used machinery in the workplace. 57.2% had a work accident in Türkiye. The work-related characteristics of the Syrian workers in the study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Characteristics of Syrian workers about their jobs

Parameters	n	%
Working time in current workplace		
0-12 months	56	27.9
13-24 months	61	30.3
25-36 months	36	17.9
37-48 months	30	14.9
49 months and above	18	9.0
Status of receiving education related to job		
Educated	167	83.1

Uneducated	34	16.9
Place of training related to the job		
Master-Apprentice	152	86.9
College and above	10	5.7
Vocational High School	6	3.4
Other	4	2.3
In-service workplace training	3	1.7
State of finding the education received sufficient		
Sufficient	94	56.3
Moderate	66	39.5
Insufficient	7	4.2
Occupational accident status		
Had accident	115	57.2
No accident	86	42.8
Number of Occupational Accidents		
1	22	19.1
2-4	43	37.4
5-7	23	20.0
8-10	13	11.3
More than 10	14	12.2

There was no significant relationship between age, length of work experience, weekly working hours, and the occurrence of an occupational accident. A statistically significant relationship was found between the educational level of the participants and their machine use and work accident status (Table

3). The odds ratio (OR) of having a work accident was 2.09 (1.17-3.73) for those with a secondary education level and below compared to those with a high school or higher education degree. The OR of having a work accident was 2.60 (1.47-4.63) for machine users compared to non-machine users.

Table 3: The relationship between educational status and machine use of Syrian workers and the status of having a work accident

Parameters		Work accident		p	OR (95% CI)*
		Had accident n (%)	No accident n (%)		
Education Status	High school and above	36 (46.2)	42 (53.8)	0.012	2.09 (1.17-3.73)
	Middle school and below	79 (64.2)	44 (35.8)		
Machine Use	No	40 (44.4)	50 (55.6)	0.001	2.60 (1.47-4.63)
	Yes	75 (67.6)	36 (32.4)		

Note: *Chi-Square Test, Risk coefficient; OR: Odds Ratio; CI: Confidence Interval

The results of the correlation analysis between the age, duration of work, weekly working hours, and monthly salaries of the participants (Table 4) revealed that there was a very weak correlation between the age of the participants and the duration of working at the current workplace, a very weak correlation between their monthly salary and the period of working at their current

workplace, and a weak correlation between their age and monthly salary. No correlation was found between weekly working hours and monthly salary. The statistical relationship between monthly salary and educational status was analyzed with the One-Way ANOVA test, and no statistically significant relationship was found ($F=2.605$, $p=0.76$).

Table 4: The results of the simple correlation analysis between age of Syrian workers, length of time they worked at the current workplace, weekly working hours and monthly salaries

Parameters	Age	Time worked at current workplace	Weekly working hours	Monthly salary
Age	1	0.205*	-0.330	0.254*
Time worked at current workplace		1	-0.115	0.219*
Weekly working hours			1	-0.092
Monthly salary				1

*Significance was evaluated at $p < 0.01$ level in correlation analysis

Discussion

Immigration from Syria started in 2011 and is the most significant global migration movement post-World War II. It also draws attention to being the largest migration movement in the post-Republican period of Türkiye (17). This situation poses many social, cultural, and economic problems. The main one among these problems is the labor market.

In the event of an emergency such as war, the temporary accommodation centers is always among the options (18). In our study, only 0.5% of workers lived in temporary accommodation centers. Different accommodation due to their jobs may have caused this rate to be low.

Cheap labor and unregistered employment of refugees is a long-standing problem (19). The employment of refugees is a problem for host countries (20).

According to the Syrian Refugee Livelihood Monitor, 31% of the SRs in Türkiye are currently included in the labor market (21). In addition, as of 2017, only 0.6% of Syrians have had a work permit (22). All the participants worked without a work permit and social security insurance. Therefore, they could not benefit from the social security rights guaranteed under the Social Insurance and General Health Insurance Law, such as the right to receive compensation in cases of work accidents and occupational disease and access to health services. 57% of the participants had a work accident, and the rate of those with more than one work accident was high. Most participants' education level was primary school and below. People at this level of education were at twice the risk of having work accidents than those with a higher education

level. Most of the vocational training received by the workers was informal (master-apprentice relationship etc.). This training was insufficient since the risk of occupational accidents for those who use machines was 2.6 times higher than for those who do not.

According to a study conducted in Denizli on the Syrian labor market, behind the ease of admission to employment was the fact that they were a labor group that consented to do cheap, informal, heavy, dangerous, and dirty work. It was revealed that Syrian women did not participate in employment due to cultural barriers. The burden of care and child labor increased when the father was not alive, or his income was not enough to support the household (23). A study in Istanbul in 2015 with 300 Syrian and 300 Turkish citizens revealed that all Syrian workers were employed without insurance, the rate of child workers under 18 was 29%, and 35% of the Syrian textile workers were unskilled (24). Our study showed that only 7% of Syrian workers were women. The rate of child labor under the age of 18 was 9.5%.

It was observed that the participants, whose stay in Denizli ranged from 1 to 5.5 years, changed between 5 and 21 jobs during this period (23). The most important reason for this was low wages rather than the working conditions. In our study, the mean duration of changing jobs was 10.6 months, and the most common reason for changing jobs was poor working conditions.

In 2017, when our study was conducted, the minimum wage in Türkiye was approximately 370 USD. In the same year, when the countries close to Türkiye and having similar GDP per capita were

analyzed, it was seen that this amount was 260 USD in Bulgaria, 310 USD in Romania, and 500 USD in Poland (25). In the study in Denizli, daily wage earners stated that their daily wages were around 11 USD, while those who received monthly salaries indicated that they had an income of about 330 USD (23). The study conducted in Istanbul revealed that the average monthly wage for Turks was approximately 520 USD, while it was ~417 USD for Syrians (24, 25). Similar to other studies, our research found the average wage as ~306 USD, which was below the minimum wage. In addition, there was no difference in salary between those with a high level of education and those with a low level of education because workers were placed in any job they could find, not according to the education they received. Because of the high competition in unskilled jobs, they have no opportunity to demand higher wages. The time the worker worked at the current workplace and increased age had a weak positive effect on the salary. This is because the wage increases naturally as the seniority in the workplace increases and older people demand more salary. However, these expectations still needed to be fully met.

In the study conducted in Istanbul (24), only 97.7% of the workers interviewed stated that they worked more than 45 hours per week, which is the legal working time. In our study, this rate was found to be 96.5%. In addition, the long working hours did not affect salaries. In other words, the Syrian workers worked beyond the legal limits and did not receive the payment they should have.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations in this study. First, the study was conducted in a single center, and the number of participants was relatively low. Second, due to the language barrier, the data collection process was conducted with the help of a translator. Third, due to the difficult conditions of the study group, the study sample was relatively small compared to the minimum sample size required, and caution should be exercised in generalizing the results beyond the study group. Finally, randomization could not be performed in the sample selection because there needed to be

an official list of workers.

Conclusion

As a result, the conclusions based on the findings of our study can be listed as follows. To overcome the difficulties that Syrians face in working life, the causes of the problems should be eliminated. Undeclared work should be prevented. Studies on the employability of Syrians should be expanded and employment areas suitable for the qualifications of this young workforce should be created by focusing on the continuation of the education process, language, job and skills training, and capacity development.

References

1. Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees | UNHCR [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>
2. Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>
3. Extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers, Refugees, and their Families: Guide for Policymakers and Practitioners | International Labour Organization [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/extending-social-protection-migrant-workers-refugees-and-their-families>
4. UNHCR [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. The 1951 Refugee Convention. Available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>
5. Brorström S, Diedrich A. Boundaries of collaboration – the case of a temporary housing complex for refugees in Sweden. *Public Manag Rev.* 2022 ;24(4):536–57.
6. Differences in working conditions and employment arrangements among migrant and non-migrant workers in Europe - PubMed [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23534504/>
7. Refugee rights and realities: evolving international concepts and regimes [Internet]. UK; 1999 [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000119057>
8. Gibney MJ. Between Control and Humanitarianism:

- Temporary Protection in Contemporary Europe. Georgia Immigration Law J. 1999;14:689.
9. Chen H shui. Chinatown No More: Taiwan Immigrants in Contemporary New York [Internet]. Sanjek R, editor. Cornell University Press; 1992 [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g616>
 10. Abella MI. Labour migration policy and management: training modules. [Internet]. 2005 [Cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_bk_pb_202_en.pdf
 11. Habib RR, Ziadee M, Abi Younes E, Harastani H, Hamdar L, Jawad M, et al. Displacement, deprivation and hard work among Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. *BMJ Glob Health*. 2019;4(1):e001122.
 12. Meyer SR, Yu G, Rieders E, Stark L. Child labor, sex and mental health outcomes amongst adolescent refugees. *J Adolesc*. 2020;81:52–60.
 13. Nuwayhid IA, Usta J, Makarem M, Khudr A, El-Zein A. Health of children working in small urban industrial shops. *Occup Environ Med*. 2005;62(2):86–94.
 14. Aydin H, Kaya Y. The educational needs of and barriers faced by Syrian refugee students in Turkey: a qualitative case study. *Intercult Educ*. 2017;28(5):456–73.
 15. Hatay / Küçük Sanayi Siteleri - DOĞAKA | T.C. Doğu Akdeniz Kalkınma Ajansı | www.dogaka.gov.tr [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://www.dogaka.gov.tr/dogu-akdeniz/hatay/hatay-kucuk-sanayi-siteleri>
 16. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/>
 17. Bahcekapili C, Cetin B. The Impacts of Forced Migration on Regional Economies: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Turkey. *Int Bus Res*. 2015;8(9):p1.
 18. Fansa M, Ersoy A. The Life of Syrian Asylum-Seeking Children in a Temporary Shelter Centre in Turkey: An Ethnographic Study on Primary School Education. *Int Electron J Elem Educ*. 2022;14(5):679–91.
 19. Chambers R. Hidden losers? The impact of rural refugees and refugee programs on poorer hosts. *Int Migr Rev*. 1986;20(2):245–63.
 20. Şahin Mencütek Z, Nashwan AJJ. Employment of Syrian refugees in Jordan: challenges and opportunities. *J Ethn Cult Divers Soc Work*. 2021;30(6):500–22.
 21. Vakfı İİG. Syrian refugee livelihood monitor–summary assessment. 2017;
 22. Çoban B. Türkiye’de işsizlik profili bağlamında Suriyeli gençlerin İstanbul işgücü piyasasına katılım sorunları. *Çalışma Ve Toplum*. 2018;1(56):193–216.
 23. Akbaş S, Ulutaş ÇÜ. Küresel Fabrika Kentinin Görünmeyen İşçileri: Denizli İşgücü Piyasasında Suriyeli Göçmenler. *Çalış Ve Toplum*. 2018;1(56):167–92.
 24. Kahveci M. From Guest to Second Class Workers: Wage Discrimination among Syrian and Turkish Workers. *Bull Econ Theory Anal*. 2019;4(2):97–118.
 25. Statistics | Eurostat [Internet]. [cited 2024 Oct 8]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/earn_mw_cur/default/table?lang=en