The Health of Migrant Seafarers

A Call for Considering Seafarers in Public and Global Health Policy

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Introduction

Seafarers, people who live and work at sea, are an understudied population group, yet contribute to the majority of global trade; almost ninety-percent of goods and approximately 1,500,000 seafarers are part of the shipping industry (a 24% increase since 2010). Their transient lives make them easy to be ignored or forgotten, yet they are not an inaccessible population group; most seafarers spend at least a few hours at their ports-of-call. A focus on seafarers in public and global health policies is vital, especially with the imbalance between documenting land travel and migrant health versus sea travel and migrant health. Public and global health policy has traditionally studied migration as a land-based phenomenon, and sea travel has been understood as a border-crossing mechanism, not a place of work and living. Although public and global health research largely focuses on the bounds of land-based nation-states, the study of seafarers can help one reimagine health as more than land-based. This would have significant effects on how we approach the right to health care and health care globally.

The Need

More research is needed on seafarer health

Little critical research has been done regarding seafarers generally and even less so regarding seafarers health and access to health care. A recent literature review published in the International Maritime Health journal found that most research focuses on safety, disease, and delivery of care instead of more robust critical understandings of how policies, laws, and regulations can facilitate and/or impede seafarer’s right to health and health care. In other words, more research is needed in identifying the sociopolitical conditions within which seafarers exist and how those conditions affect their health care.

Seafarers face greater occupational health risks

For more information

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CEHD issue briefs are meant to highlight an emerging issue around health inequities.
Seafaring is a fraught and complicated way of life and their right to health and health care must account for numerous determinants that shape their health and well-being and contribute to their illness, injury, and demise. Illness and death risks include high incidences of drowning fatalities, slips, trips, falls, fractures, heart attacks, malaria, dental pain, and mental health problems. Seafarers have ten times the fatalities as land-based occupations and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that offshore workers have seven times the fatality rates than the US average, making it one of the top ten worst jobs in the United States. Occupational Health scholars have identified seafarers as a known risk group, but an under-researched population group, writing: “Given the importance of illness and injury at sea, in operational, financial, and crew welfare terms . . . it is curious that there has not been far more work on this facet of maritime health.”

Flags of convenience
The United Nation’s International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) were created as a direct result of industrialization and the subsequent exploitation of workers, but the use of “flags of convenience” beginning in the 1920s as a means to circumvent prohibition has had dramatic effects on the protection of seafarers in spite of IMO and ILO regulations. For instance, the flag State (the state represented by the flag a ship is flying) is ultimately responsible for maintaining ship registers; the jurisdiction over the ship, the master, officers, and crew; taking measures regarding safety; ensuring the ships conform to international rules and practices; carrying out investigations; carrying out or cooperating with other State investigations; and some anti-pollution measures. Today, 68% of ships are known to fly under open registries or flags of convenience, which means ships can fly under a flag that does not belong to the ship owners’ country. This is significant because flags of convenience can allow shipping companies to bypass certain rules and regulations that are to the benefit of the companies and to the detriment of seafarers, and may be pernicious to seafarer’s health and well-being.

The erosion of worker protections
Since the mid-twentieth century there have been dramatic impacts to the economic viability of international sea transport, worker protections, and the trajectory of globalization. The rise in container shipping in the 1970s made shipping cheaper and more lucrative, changing the make-up of how goods were delivered and who delivered them. Containerization allows for outsourcing labor, and thereby taking advantage of cheaper labor abroad. Subsequently, containerization also reduced employment opportunities at U.S. docks by cutting port labor costs and using non-union services.

Precarious employment is a social determinant of health
Easier shipping and increased trade led to greater competition and lower prices on imported goods, helping bring an end to the labor improvements of the post-World War II era, and “increasing the bargaining power of employers against their far less mobile workers”. On paper, worker protections were not eliminated, but this competition reshaped global labor relations, creating the possibility of disposable worker protections, and subsequently, a disposable workforce. Joan Benach, et al. write that the “global increase of flexible employment relations,” “higher levels of job insecurity,” “erosion of workers’ employment and working conditions,” and “limited workplace rights and social protection” have led to precarious employment as an emerging social determinant of health.

“Since 2009, the world fleet has increased by 37%.”
Benefits of a Focus on Seafarer Health

There are numerous laws, regulations, and human rights norms that have been established to protect seafarers, but uncertain recourse to lay claim to such laws, regulations, and norms while at sea. Lack of recourse to policies and regulations, taken together with the changed conditions of labor and worker protections through economic and labor policies, create the conditions that may be ripe for worse health inequalities among seafarers. Studying the seafaring industry alongside economic and labor polices thus contributes to the health care rights of seafarers as well as lends context to national and international policy frameworks around U.S. migration. In summary, the significance of focusing on seafarers’ health within global and public health inheres in the contributions of interdisciplinary fields that can reveal the unique conflation of policies, spaces, and experiences of seafarers and their health care rights.

Potential Paths Forward

Health is more than the mere absence of disease – sociopolitical structures come to not only matter, but they shape people’s health and play an integral role in the facilitation or impediment of health care and to the health arrangements and conditions of workers. There are many potential ways to better understand and address the health risks and health needs of seafarers:

**Deserved recognition** at the global health level. We envisage a need for a comprehensive policy document that is recognized and adopted by a global health decision making forum like the World Health Assembly. This forum may regulate access to health care and specify the duty bearer for the right to health of seafarers as claim holders at different places during their working duties.

**Proper protection** to seafarers’ labor, safety, health and access to health care rights within international and national trade policies and regulations. The protection should cover the different workplaces on land and sea.

**Further research** in public health and global health domains to examine the wide range of determinants that shape seafarers’ health and access to health care. These include determinates related to global health policies, economic and labor policies, and international and national regulations of health care to seafarers on land and sea. They also include gaps between existing regulations and practices. Special focus should be given to the lived experiences of seafarers and health risks they experience (physical and mental health).

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*Lack of recourse to policies and regulations, taken together with the changed conditions of labor and worker protections through economic and labor policies, create the conditions that may be ripe for worse health inequalities among seafarers.*

Photo by Shannon Guillot-Wright
References


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