Cancer Care Disparities Highlighted in Crisis, Displaced Populations

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 29 May 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

> The provision of timely and effective cancer care faces substantial impediments in settings of humanitarian crisis and among immigrant and displaced populations. Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive understanding of systemic barriers and the development of targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to diagnosis, treatment, and supportive care.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: Recognition of specific, actionable barriers to cancer care in vulnerable populations.
- The Data: No single statistic, but consistent evidence of delayed diagnosis and treatment interruptions.
- The Action: Clinicians should advocate for integrated care models and culturally competent services.

The ASCO 2026 sessions on cancer care in times of crisis and in immigrant and displaced populations underscored persistent challenges in oncology. These discussions highlighted that access to cancer screening, diagnosis, and treatment is often severely compromised for individuals affected by conflict, natural disasters, or forced migration.1 Such populations frequently encounter barriers including disrupted healthcare infrastructure, lack of health insurance or financial resources, language barriers, and cultural insensitivity within host healthcare systems.2

For instance, individuals in conflict zones may experience complete cessation of cancer services, leading to advanced disease presentation and poorer prognoses.3 Displaced populations, including refugees and asylum seekers, often face administrative hurdles in accessing care, such as complex registration processes or lack of recognition of their medical histories.4 Furthermore, the psychological trauma associated with displacement can exacerbate health issues and complicate adherence to treatment regimens.5

The clinical implications of these disparities are profound. Patients presenting with advanced-stage cancers require more intensive and often more toxic treatments, which can lead to increased morbidity and mortality. The lack of early detection mechanisms, such as mammography for breast cancer or colonoscopy for colorectal cancer, directly contributes to this stage shift. Moreover, the stress of displacement and acculturation can impact immune function and overall physiological resilience, potentially affecting treatment response and recovery. The specific types of cancers prevalent in these populations can also vary based on geographic origin and lifestyle changes post-migration, further complicating standardized care approaches.

Addressing Disparities in Cancer Care

Discussions at ASCO 2026 emphasized the multifaceted nature of these disparities. For immigrant populations, challenges often begin with a lack of awareness regarding available screening programs or a misunderstanding of

healthcare system navigation.6 This can result in delayed presentation with more advanced disease stages, which are inherently more difficult and costly to treat.7 Data presented consistently indicated that these populations experience lower rates of participation in preventative screenings for cancers such as breast, cervical, and colorectal cancer.8

In crisis settings, the immediate focus is often on acute trauma and infectious diseases, leading to the deprioritization of chronic conditions like cancer.9 This can result in interruptions to ongoing chemotherapy or radiation therapy, which can significantly impact treatment efficacy and patient survival.10 The lack of specialized oncology personnel and essential medications in these environments further compounds the problem.11

The methodology for identifying these disparities often involves retrospective analyses of health records, surveys of patient experiences, and epidemiological studies comparing cancer outcomes between vulnerable populations and general populations. These studies frequently employ qualitative methods to understand the lived experiences and perceived barriers to care, complementing quantitative data on screening rates and survival. Patient populations examined included both internally displaced persons within their home countries and international refugees and asylum seekers residing in host nations, highlighting the global scope of the issue.

Several strategies were discussed to mitigate these issues. These included the implementation of mobile health clinics, the development of culturally and linguistically appropriate health education materials, and the training of healthcare providers in cultural competence.12 The importance of establishing robust referral pathways and integrating cancer care into primary healthcare services in humanitarian settings was also highlighted.13 Furthermore, the role of international collaborations and non-governmental organizations in providing support and resources for cancer patients in crisis-affected regions was emphasized.14

Limitations in current approaches include the scarcity of granular data on cancer incidence and outcomes specifically within these vulnerable populations, making it difficult to tailor interventions precisely.15 The transient nature of displaced populations also poses significant challenges for long-term follow-up and continuity of care.16 Furthermore, ethical considerations surrounding data collection in vulnerable populations, including issues of consent and privacy, can impede comprehensive research. The heterogeneity of crisis situations and displaced populations means that interventions effective in one context may not be directly transferable to another, necessitating context-specific adaptations. Future research needs to focus on developing standardized data collection methods and evaluating the effectiveness of proposed interventions in diverse crisis and displacement contexts.17

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The ASCO 2026 discussions serve as a stark reminder that oncology cannot operate in a vacuum, isolated from geopolitical realities and social determinants of health. Clinicians, particularly those in primary care, must recognize that a patient's immigration status or experience of displacement directly impacts their cancer journey. Expecting patients from crisis zones to seamlessly navigate complex healthcare systems without tailored support is not merely optimistic, it is negligent. We need to move beyond simply acknowledging disparities and actively implement strategies like interpreter services, streamlined administrative processes, and culturally sensitive patient navigators. This isn't just about equity; it's about clinical effectiveness, as delayed diagnoses and interrupted treatments lead to poorer outcomes and ultimately, higher costs.

For pharmaceutical companies and medical device manufacturers, this presents a challenge and an

opportunity. While the immediate market in crisis zones may seem unappealing, the long-term implications of neglected populations are significant. Investing in research and development for more robust, less infrastructure-dependent diagnostic tools and treatments, or supporting initiatives that ensure drug supply chains can withstand disruptions, is not just corporate social responsibility; it's future-proofing. Furthermore, the data gaps highlighted underscore a need for funding mechanisms that support epidemiological studies in these hard-to-reach populations, providing the evidence base for future interventions. Without this, we are operating on assumptions, not data.

Ultimately, the onus is on professional bodies and policymakers to integrate these considerations into national and international health strategies. Guidelines for cancer care must explicitly address the unique needs of immigrant and displaced populations, moving beyond generic recommendations. This requires political will and sustained funding, not just ad hoc responses to crises. The ethical imperative is clear: cancer does not discriminate based on nationality or circumstance, and neither should our response to it. Ignoring these populations means accepting preventable suffering and poorer public health outcomes globally.

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