

Access to Healthcare Matters, Particularly for Undocumented Migrants and Refugees

Sascha Krannich, 22.01.2026

In November 2025, I attended the [German American Conference at the Harvard Kennedy School](#) in Boston. A pretty unique conference, which is solely organized by German students in the United States and Germany, and it is the largest student organized conference at Harvard, which takes place annually and was this time titled “Transatlantic Relationship at a Crossroads,” addressing transatlantic topics ranging from the state of the economy, rising populism and right-wing nationalism to global innovations in research and education. And the issue of migration, of course!

Migration is still discussed heavily on both ends of the Atlantic, sometimes reasonable, sometimes misty-eyed, disturbing, but definitely many times emotional. That was also the case again at the panel I attended at this conference with two other migration researchers from the United States – Muzaffar Chishti (Migration Policy Institute) and Mark Krikorian (Center for Immigration Studies) – about “Migration, Identity, and Policy in Germany and the USA”, where we discussed and compared immigration policies and current integration challenges in both countries. The discussion heated up when participating students asked about the current situation of undocumented migrants and refugees, especially when we think about the pervasive arrests, deportations, and rejections of these groups in the US as well as in Germany. Not only that many times these actions are utterly human rights and even constitutional violations, it is also about the basic question whether undocumented migrants and refugees should have access to the welfare system in the country where they reside. If we just take the matter of healthcare. Particularly undocumented migrants do not have legal access to health and healthcare, neither in Germany nor the United States. Refugees have some access, but only restricted (primarily regarding psychological support and dental care) ([Wallace/Young 2018](#), [Clark et al. 2020](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic showed dramatically how much these vulnerable groups suffered under these exclusions and restrictions. Research studies indicated that exacerbated preexisting differentials in access to health and healthcare generated higher rates of COVID-19 infections, morbidity, and mortality among migrant children and adults. This trend did not stop after the pandemic, but probably even speeded up. The prospects for a full post-pandemic recovery of immigrants’ wellbeing were dampened by the severe nature of COVID’s negative effects on immigrants, the hostile context of reception immigrants face after the pandemic, the large number of immigrants lacking legal status or holding tenuous documentation, and the “formidable deportation regime” (to quote Douglas Massey) that prevails in the United States (and to some extent in Germany and Europe) that puts a great strain on immigrant communities ([Krannich/Massey 2024](#)).

But to end with a positive note: At the German American Conference, we also highlighted the potential of migrant doctors, health workers, and organizations founded by migrants to work on health issues, providing alternative forms of health for undocumented migrants and refugees

as well as advocating for legal access to healthcare of these migrant groups. That could be a blueprint for the larger society and governments that are still struggling to negotiate and provide adequate access to healthcare for many migrant groups. A full inclusion of all migrant groups into the health system would be beneficial for all of us, because it helps to get healthier people into schools and jobs, and therefore, lowers health costs in the long-run (Hunger/Ansar/Krannich 2025).

In a nutshell, it was good that students organized such a conference that gives room to discuss and digest controversial social and political issues. And sometimes it helps to find loopholes at blind alleys. That's important in such fevered times (again!).

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Link to the German American Conference webpage:

<https://germanamericanconference.org/>

See also article about the conference at Süddeutsche Zeitung:

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/harvard-konferenz-deutschland-trump-reichinnek-li.3338364?reduced=true>

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