

## **Is one population group more affected by corona than another?**

Covid-19 appears to be hitting people of ethnic minority background more often. Does the coronavirus discriminate? And if yes, what explanations are conceivable?

*By Ellen de Visser Photo Raymond Rutting published in Volkskrant October 13<sup>th</sup> 2020, translation by Tom Carter, EFPC Junior Coordinator.*

The coronavirus does discriminate, that is what Armand Girbes, head of the IC in Amsterdam VUmc wanted to emphasize this weekend. Girbes told the VPRO radio program "Argos" that most of the Covid patients on the IC's in major cities are from "a non-western background"- that is of ethnic minority or migration background. Left right - wing populist Political PVV leader Geert Wilders immediately jumped on top of this and demanded an explanation from the cabinet in a tweet: "All mosques closed and catering again open?". The question is whether the observations of Girbes reflects a national trend. Diederik Gommers, head of the IC at the Rotterdam ErasmusMC, on Sunday evening during the radio program "Met het Oog op Morgen" said he does not agree with the conclusion of his Amsterdam colleague. Registration of ethnicity is not allowed in Dutch hospitals. "If I rely on assessing background on the last name of my patients, then I can quickly go wrong, especially when it comes to women who have taken their husband's name. Such an overrepresentation is possible, what could be the case during one point in time could be very different again in a month."

Yet, since the outbreak of the pandemic, there have been indications of ethnic inequality. Statistics Netherlands analyzed excess mortality in May during the first six weeks of the outbreak and concluded that in populations with a migration background, almost 50 percent more people had died whilst the excess mortality for residents with a Dutch background was almost 40 percent. Furthermore, British and American research explained large differences.

Dutch research is underway: scientists from Amsterdam UMC will soon be publishing their research results into the relationship between Covid and ethnicity. In recent months, a large group of Amsterdam citizens of different origins have been studied, examining their risk of getting Covid-19 and the difference in course of the disease, says internist Bert-Jan van den Born.

### **Why does the virus discriminate?**

General practitioner Maria van den Muijsenbergh, who is a professor at Radboud UMC and conducts research into health inequalities at expertise centre Pharos, takes a closer look at six possible explanations.

### **More often, a contact-profession**

Cleaning work, surveillance work, work in agriculture or in slaughterhouses: this work is more often done by migrants and these are jobs where they cannot work from home. For the Eastern European migrant workers who are transported to work in tight vans, the one-and-a-half meter distance rule, for example, is a lot more difficult to follow.

### **Cramped housing**

Larger families, three generations together and small, poorly ventilated houses: it is more common among migrants, says Van den Muijsenbergh, and that increases the chance that they will infect each other.

### **More underlying diseases**

If they become infected with the coronavirus, people with a migration background are more likely to have a more serious course of the disease because they often have an underlying condition. Severe obesity, for example, occurs one and a half to two times more among people of Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan and Antillean descent in comparison to people with a Dutch background. Persons of Turkish descent are twice more likely to have type 2 diabetes than the native Dutch, Hindustani even three to four times more often. Poor living conditions, poverty and chronic stress play a role in this, says Van den Muijsenbergh: these factors also complicate a healthy lifestyle.

### **Unclear Measures**

The government information about corona is too complicated for many migrants, says Van den Muijsenbergh, who was investigating this on behalf of the RIVM (Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment). Many persons know the corona measures when interviewed; however, they had not picked them up from Dutch Prime Minister Rutte's press conference. Instead, they had been informed by family or had read about it on social media. "We saw that they wanted to abide by those rules, but that because of circumstances often couldn't." For her research she spoke to 65 residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods and there was no difference, says the professor, between people with and without a migration background, regarding the understanding or compliance with the rules.

### **Genetic Differences**

Van den Muijsenbergh noticed this when she followed a number of homeless people: among the homeless originating from outside the European Union many more ended up in the hospital with a corona infection compared to the group with a Dutch background, whilst their living conditions are, as she says, "just as bad". Like many foreign scientists, she is convinced that a genetic component can explain some of the differences.

Swedish scientists wrote late last month in the journal Nature about gene variants that predict a more serious case of COVID; variants that are more common in people in South Asia. The scientific literature also suggests that there are differences between population groups in the amount of ace2 receptors, the gates on cells that the coronavirus access. This could be a difference in sensitivity to declare. People with dark skin color living in Northern Europe also more often suffer from vitamin D deficiency, and researchers have found that this has been associated with a greater susceptibility to the coronavirus and even a more severe course of Covid.

### **Cultural differences**

Van den Muijsenbergh has heard many times the opinion that migrants come together much more often in large groups and that would explain why the virus hits them harder. "It will certainly play a role, but it is no bigger than with the protestant religious groups in Staphorst who go to church or with young people who want to party. "She knows enough Imams (Muslim religion leaders), who ask people not to come to the mosque but to organize the prayer online."