Letters to the Editor

Differences in COVID-19 Risk Between Occupational Groups and Employment Sectors in Germany

by Dr. Matthias Möhner and Andreas Wolik in issue 38/2020

Results regarding the risk of infection in temporary workers are not valid

The Association of German Temporary Employment Agencies (iGZ e.V.) suspects breaches of scientific quality criteria in the study reported as “Differences in COVID-19 risk between occupational groups and employment sectors in Germany.” The criticisms apply primarily to the methods for defining the group of temporary employees/agency workers and assigning them to industry sectors.

The authors applied code 780, “Placement of employees,” to employment sectors 781–783 for the criterion “temporary employees.” On the basis of employment statistics from the Federal Employment Agency, the employment sector temporary work (WZ ANÜ) is defined only by industry branches 782 and 783 (WZ 2008). Furthermore, WZ ANÜ includes permanent staff and temporary workers. The group of temporary workers can therefore only be correctly defined by the BA activity code (item 8). Code 780 can therefore not be applied to temporary workers.

The authors combined code 780 with occupational groups and characterized it as the employment sector for temporary workers, for example under occupational group 513, as “temporary workers in warehouse management or postal services). But the

employment statistic does not collect data about the employment sector of temporary workers. The criterium “activity performed” is not suitable for determining the employment sector of temporary workers, as they are—for example in the occupational group 513—also active in the manufacturing sector. In principle, information about the employment sector and occupation is defined by the the circumstances at the beginning of employment or at the end of the employment. This presents a not insubstantial documentation problem as regards different employment placements and employment sectors of temporary workers.

Altogether the authors applied in the area of temporary work a combination of employment sectors and occupations, which the official statistic does not allow. For this reason, the results regarding the infection risk of temporary workers are not valid.

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Reference

1. Möhner M, Wolik A: Differences in COVID-19 risk between occupational groups and employment sectors in Germany. *Dtsch Arztebl Int* 2020; 117: 641–2.

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Conflict of interest statement

Ms Schlitt is employed by the Association of German Temporary Employment Agencies (iGZ).

In Reply:

We robustly refute as entirely unfounded the criticisms expressed by the Association of German Temporary Employment Agencies (iGZ), which relates primarily to the demand for a separate analysis of the employment sector provision of employees (codes 78.2/78.3); which the iGZ terms temporary workers) and the placement of employees (78.1). The criticism can be countered with scientific arguments.

- The German Federal Statistical Office’s classification system has a hierarchical structure (1). The large number of employment sectors at the third level of classification—272 groups in total—necessitated for us to subsume similar groups according to our objective.
- The superior second classification level of the employment sector 78 (employment activities) includes the named three employment groups, which—in contrast to all other employment groups—are not derived from the type of occupational activity but the type of their employment contract.
- According to the German Federal Statistical Office, only 3.6% of employees from employment sector 78 fall into employment sector group 78.1 (2). For this reason, the results for the two employment sector groups for provision of employees differ only to a minuscule degree from the results in our article when employment sector group placement of employees is additionally included.
- Employment sector 78 was notable owing to its significantly raised risk of infection as estimated on the basis of hospital

data (Table 2 in the long version of our analysis) (3). For this reason, we attempted on the basis of data regarding occupation to localize the actual risk area more precisely. We discussed the validity of the occupational data in the detailed explanation of the project (3).

In sum, our results, which are based on a large study population, provide indications of employment sectors and occupations with an increased risk of infection, which show scope for extended health and safety provisions in the workplace.

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Conflict of interest statement

Andreas Wolik is an employee of the BARMER Institute for Health System Research (Institut für Gesundheitssystemforschung). Matthias Möhner declares that no conflict of interest exist.