



The COVID-19 pandemic: we need urgent measures to protect people and mend the cracks in our health, social protection and migration systems

Being undocumented in Europe today means being among those most exposed to COVID-19, and among the least protected.

To limit the spread of the virus, measures urgently need to be put in place to ensure that every corner of the population has access to the services and support they need to avoid infection or further transmission. It will also be necessary to reform existing policies that create vulnerability to infection for people with precarious residence status.

In most parts of Europe, primary health care is inaccessible to people with irregular migration status. This means, in many cases, limited or no access to a general practitioner, and no right to subsidised care except in the case of emergencies. Hidden in full sight, people who are undocumented care for our elderly and our children, clean our homes, cook and serve our meals in restaurants, pick our fruit, build our office towers, deliver our takeaways. They raise their children and live their lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark example of the public sector's critical role in "leaving no one behind", and of how gaps in our health systems leave us all vulnerable.

In the context of a spreading pandemic, states must ensure that preventative care, goods, services and information are available and accessible to everyone, regardless of their residence status.

The pandemic is also placing workers and their families across all sectors in situations of precarity and potential poverty. COVID-19 is shining a light on the need for social protection systems to be stepped up to respond to such challenges and ensure a safety net for all workers, including those registered as self-employed and in atypical employment relationships.

In this context, migrant workers are facing particular challenges. For many, their right to remain in the country where they live and work depends on their job. Job losses resulting from the economic fallout of the pandemic

will leave people without status and facing possible deportation. Many migrants work in sectors defined by informality or under-regulation, doing jobs that cannot be done from home and where they have few rights and benefits. For many, particularly when undocumented, losing their source of income simply isn't an option, because they are excluded from most government financial support. This means they have no choice but to continue to go to work, exposing themselves to greater risk of infection. And when that work is suspended, they will rely on communities to provide the safety net where the government is absent. Those communities in turn are already facing difficulties in providing services due to the crisis. We can only expect this to lead to extreme poverty and destitution.

For undocumented individuals and families in situations of acute vulnerability, such as those who are homeless, living in encampments, reception centers, or in immigration detention, the risk of infection is great because of proximity and poor living conditions. It is even more difficult to contain the spread of the virus in such precarious and overcrowded settings.

The pandemic is also exposing our intense reliance on workers in low-wage occupations - the hospital orderlies, supermarket staff, riders doing food delivery, and countless others - who are continuously exposing themselves to risk to keep our societies going. Future work permit schemes must resolve the contradiction in current policies, which make it incredibly difficult for people from outside the EU to get a permit to do these jobs in most countries, while in reality they are crucial jobs, often done by migrant workers.

Viruses don't discriminate. Whatever our residence status or nationality, wealth or power, we are all at risk. But social exclusion can leave some even more exposed and less protected. The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of the need for universal health care that reaches the most marginalised in our societies to ensure everyone's health.

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PICUM calls on public authorities to:

- 1. Provide emergency support to marginalised populations.** Among emergency measures, include funding to organisations providing essential support to marginalised communities - including undocumented migrants - to enable them to find ways to meet increased need in these complex circumstances for service delivery.
- 2. Address gaps in public health systems.** Guarantee access to preventive and curative health care for all, including testing for COVID-19, with particular attention to the most marginalised groups in society, irrespective of their immigration status.
- 3. Prioritise health over immigration status.** Put in place measures ('firewalls') that shield people from possible transfer of their personal data from services to immigration authorities, and the risk of deportation if they seek care.
- 4. Address homelessness and food insecurity.** Do not fine people for not respecting social distancing measures when they have no other option and provide adequate accommodation for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, regardless of residence status. Find ways to carry out food distribution to people who cannot provide for themselves.
- 5. Empower through information.** Work with NGOs to disseminate important information to migrant communities in their own languages about the pandemic, relevant measures, and how to protect themselves and others.
- 6. Ensure police measures introduced to control population movements are not discriminatory.** Where police are asked to enforce confinement and isolation policies, such checks must not be used to check identity and residence status. This should be clearly communicated to migrant communities as well as police.
- 7. End immigration detention** in favour of non-custodial, community-based approaches to case resolution. This is urgently needed both to reduce vulnerability to infection and because, without any reasonable prospect of removal due to the current health crisis, detention is unlawful under EU law. All individuals who are released from detention should have access to adequate shelter including by mobilizing, where necessary, hotels, unused buildings and sports halls.
- 8. Suspend all return decisions and deportations** in line with government measures to protect people's health and limit cross-border movements, and to redirect public funds to where they are most urgently needed to manage the economic and social impacts of the pandemic.
- 9. Prevent further irregularity and ensuing social exclusion by extending or issuing temporary permits to individuals in light of the current circumstances.**
 - Migrants with permits that are up for renewal or would expire during this period should receive an automatic extension of their permits, due to the lack of administrative follow-up and travel options during the crisis.
 - Considering that many migrant workers might lose their jobs, their permits should be renewed regardless of whether or not they are employed, and have access to social protection.
 - Migrants who cannot return or be returned, including for reasons related to the current health crisis, should be granted a temporary permit.
 - Where it is practically not possible to make or process new immigration or asylum applications, or review appeals against negative decisions, grant a temporary permit to affected individuals.