



# Why inclusive, needs-based social policies matter

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PICUM

# Introduction

The Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants ([PICUM](#)) was founded in 2001 as an initiative of grassroots organisations. Now representing a network of 155 organisations working with and for undocumented migrants in more than 30 countries, PICUM has built a comprehensive evidence base regarding the gap between international human rights law and the policies and practices existing at national and EU levels. With more than twenty years of evidence, experience and expertise on issues affecting undocumented migrants, PICUM promotes recognition of their fundamental rights, providing an essential link between local realities and the debates at the policy level.

PICUM is a member of [Social Platform](#), the [EU Alliance for Investing in Children](#), the [European Anti-Poverty Network](#) and the *Ad hoc advocacy coalition on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy*. PICUM supports and contributed to these different networks' recommendations on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and broader social inclusion policies.

**In an overall political context where the importance of fundamental rights is being put into question, this paper focuses on one key element: why social inclusion and anti-poverty policies should target everyone experiencing poverty, regardless of their residence or migration status.**

We refer the reader to the following publications for recommendations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the European Child Guarantee:

- PICUM, 2025, [PICUM's priorities for the next EU long-term budget. Contribution to the European Commission consultation](#)
- Social Platform, 2025, [EU Anti-Poverty Strategy](#)
- EAPN, 2025, [Towards the eradication of poverty: EAPN vision and recommendations for the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy](#)
- EU Alliance for Investing in Children, 2025, [A Europe that protects every child: Aligning EU's policies and budget to eradicate child poverty. Recommendations from the EU Alliance for Investing in Children on the European Child Guarantee, EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, and MFF](#)

# Context

There is a continuing gap between Europe's ambitions and commitments on social inclusion and the reality for the millions of undocumented people in Europe, for whom their residence status is strongly linked to poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. The exclusion of undocumented people - from labour markets, from services, from housing, from the structures intended to protect workers, children and others from situations of exploitation and abuse - has far-reaching consequences for them, their families as well as Europe as a whole. The marginalisation of whole groups of people undermines Europe's overall cohesion and perpetuates poverty across generations and within community, weakening European society.

Undocumented migrants often cannot access the systems, supports and services meant to protect workers from abuse, or support people, parents and children experiencing poverty and social exclusion. And if they can according to the law, they are often excluded in practice. These exclusions exist across the board, including in [labour rights](#), [social protection systems](#), [early childhood education and care](#), and [health care services](#).

While there is no way to know how many people find themselves in this situation, we know the group is sizeable. The most robust recent study estimates that [between 2.6 and 3.2 million](#) irregular (undocumented) migrants lived in 12 European countries between 2016 and 2023. The study also showed that the [population has been stable](#) for at least the past 15 years.

While age-disaggregated data is even more scarce than general data, we know that a substantial number of children are undocumented. Around [8% \(one in twelve\)](#) of undocumented people that came in contact with the authorities in 2023 were children. A [2019 estimate from Spain](#) showed that 147,000 zero-to-nineteen-year-olds at the time were undocumented, with 55,000 of them being younger than five.

*'Undocumented migrants' or 'undocumented people' live in a country where their residence is not officially recognized. Many have had residence permissions linked to employment, study, family, or international protection, but those permits were either temporary or very precarious and their validity expired. Children who are born to undocumented parents inherit this precarious residence status. For more on the lives of undocumented people, see [www.picum.org](http://www.picum.org)*

# Why social inclusion policies should target everyone, regardless of their residence status

To promote genuine social cohesion, inclusion policies and funding must respond to people's needs. This presents a crucial opportunity to ensure that social investments reach the most marginalised groups, including those often excluded from support despite facing high levels of vulnerability.

**Social inclusion policies, including the upcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, should target everyone experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Support should include addressing precarious or**

**undocumented residence status, as they are key drivers of exclusion and precarity.** Carrying out anti-poverty measures that include undocumented migrants benefits both people and society, is in line with fundamental rights and EU commitments, addresses the realities faced by undocumented (where many people may change from regular to irregular status) and because undocumented people are extremely vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, even though many have contributed to the welfare systems of the countries they live in.

## Higher risk of poverty

Many, if not all, undocumented people live in severe poverty as a consequence of their irregular residence status. This happens in a broader context where **third country nationals face double the risk of poverty and material deprivation than nationals**. Eurostat data shows that in 2024, 37.8% of adult third country nationals [risked poverty](#), compared to 18.6% of EU citizens living in their own member state. Similarly, 22.3% of adult third country nationals [experienced material or social deprivation](#), compared to 10.6% of nationals.

The **situation is even more urgent for undocumented people**. Undocumented people face [poor health](#) across a range of health issues

(e.g. communicable and non-communicable diseases, sexual and reproductive health and [mental health](#)). [Undocumented workers](#) are systematically underpaid and exploited, which in turn impacts other aspects of their lives. Insecure and inadequate housing conditions are common - undocumented people are overrepresented in homeless populations, as shown in cities like [Brussels](#) and [Lisbon](#). Some undocumented migrants face compounded challenges: undocumented workers of racialized communities, for instance, are [often paid even less](#), while for [persons with disabilities](#), being undocumented exacerbates barriers to access basic rights and services, including disability support.

## It benefits people in the short and long term

**Investing in needs-based social inclusion and anti-poverty policies benefits people in the short and long term.** Household income is a key social determinant of health and inextricably linked to people's well-being and opportunities. It affects the community in which people live, the quality of life,

the food available to them, type of housing they live in and the sense of security they experience. Unsurprisingly, poverty is associated with a negative impact on mental health and health risks including elevated rates of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, infant mortality, undernutrition, lead

poisoning, asthma, and dental problems. Direct actions that alleviate poverty not only have direct upshots but also long-term positive effects. For instance, providing undocumented migrants with access to healthcare, ultimately [reduces long-term healthcare expenses](#).

The **benefits are compounded when it comes to children**. Unsurprisingly, undocumented children

experience [chronically stressful childhoods](#) due to the accumulation of poverty, debt, social isolation and uncertainty about their future, which impacts the rest of their lives. By intervening early and supporting them and their parents or caretakers, negative effects can be balanced out. Equal access to services, including [early childhood education and care](#), play a pivotal role.

## People change residence statuses throughout their lives

Excluding people experiencing poverty from poverty-alleviation strategies and services solely because of their residence status is short-sighted, because it ignores the fact that migrants change residence status throughout their lives.

Being a migrant generally means that you have to renew your residence permit multiple times until you access a long-term or settled status, or are naturalised. Changes between residence permits – and statuses – is common. [Swiss data](#), for example, shows how only a minority of people who had a temporary (B) permit in 2011 were still on the same permit eleven years later. Every permit renewal entails a risk of seeing it refused and becoming undocumented. On the other hand, undocumented people may be able to regularise their stay at a later stage in life, depending on their individual circumstances and the legislation of the country they live in.

**Poverty can be addressed in part through human rights-based migration policies promoting inclusion, in particular [fair and effective regularisation mechanisms](#) and well-designed residence and work permits.**

Badly designed permits and procedures, for instance those that are [expensive](#), that make the person dependent on another person or entity (e.g., an employer), that must be renewed from outside the country or result in temporary/short-term permits, contribute to precarity, financial insecurity and poverty. For example, [research](#) into the living and working conditions of migrants working under a 'single permit' showed how migrant workers are often made dependent on their employers by the application process and conditions of their permits. And, because of that, experienced wage theft, wage deductions, long working hours, and discrimination at the workplace. Residence permits that do not give the person unrestricted access to the labour market can also cause (further) poverty, as the person is either fully dependent on subsidies if they're not allowed to work, or more vulnerable to exploitation if they're not allowed to change employer or sector.

## Undocumented people contribute to the welfare state

Many people who are currently undocumented might have previously had regular status and **paid into benefit systems while they were working on a residence and work permit**. In many cases where a worker becomes undocumented but remains employed in formal work, they [continue to pay into the benefit system](#) even after losing regular status.

Nonetheless, states severely restrict access to social protection for people with temporary, precarious or irregular residence status. This is unfair and unethical, to say the least. Legal and administrative barriers to accessing benefits, especially those people have paid into, should be eliminated.

Undocumented people who do not work and those who have only ever worked irregularly contribute to our welfare states as well. Undocumented migrants buy products and services, **paying consumption taxes** along the way. And those who **work** irregularly work most often work **in sectors that face labour shortages**, like agriculture, construction, hospitality and domestic work, ultimately making sure these businesses keep afloat, and pay corporate taxes.

PICUM members are seeing an increasing number of [elderly undocumented migrants](#) who do not have

access to pensions or any other public benefits and must face old age and ill-health despite a shrinking support network and often total dependency on charity. Even if they may have contributed to the European economy and society for decades.

**Further reading:**

*PICUM, 2022, [A snapshot of social protection measures for undocumented migrants by national and local governments](#)*

## Better for society

**Alleviating – with the ultimate goal of eradicating – poverty for everyone is [essential for building resilient, cohesive societies](#).** Indeed, in more equal societies, ill health and social problems occur less frequently – a tendency called '[the equality effect](#)'.

More unequal societies, on the other hand, [show](#) higher rates of mental illness, incarceration and clinical obesity. Inequality also [undermines people's trust](#) in one another, thus harming social cohesion and long-term stability.

## In line with fundamental rights

Poverty is, in essence, a denial of fundamental rights, whether they're economic, social or cultural. It deprives people from fully participating in society, impacts all aspects of their lives and can prevent

them from reaching their full potential. **A person's human rights do not depend on their residence status.**

## In line with EU commitments

**Needs-based anti-poverty policies and social policies are in line with existing EU policies and commitments**, not the least of which is the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and its [2021 action plan](#). It also aligns with member states' commitment to ensure access free and/or effective access to a set of services by all children in need, the [European Child Guarantee](#).

Indeed, the EU cannot meet its [three headline targets](#) by 2030 and cut the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, including at least 5 million children, without policies and actions that benefit everyone experiencing poverty.

# Additional elements to consider in order to design effective social policies

EU policy makers must consider intersectionality, the small text of the funding instruments, and the direct involvement of people experiencing poverty,

including undocumented migrants, when designing social policies.

## Intersectional factors impacting undocumented people

Undocumented migrants are a heterogeneous group. The only thing they all have in common is their (irregular) residence status, and while crucial, it should not overshadow other aspects that impact their income or their way out of poverty. The EU APS should especially keep in mind the following intersections that compound undocumented people's experience when poor or at risk of poverty:

- **Migration history:** people's individual migration trajectory can impact their lives on the short, medium and long term. For instance, college or university educated undocumented people who have been excluded from the formal labour market for years can have difficulties finding a job in line with their qualifications once they're regularised.
- **Family composition:** single, coupled up, large or small family, presence of people to take care of (children or adults)
- **Disability:** both visible and invisible disabilities
- **Age:** this applies throughout life, from childhood, to young adulthood (transition into adulthood) and old age
- **Racialisation**
- **Gender identity and gender roles:** this

includes the classic gender roles and division towards cis-gendered people, but also the compounded challenges undocumented transgender people experience

- **Sexual orientation**
- **Level of (computer) literacy**
- **Religion or belief**
- **Health, including mental health:** particularly for victims of violence, trafficking, trauma

### Further reading:

*PICUM, 2021, [Navigating irregularity: the impact of growing up undocumented in Europe](#)*

*PICUM, 2022, [Turning 18 and undocumented: supporting children in their transition into adulthood](#)*

*PICUM, 2024, [Navigating disability and irregular status in Europe](#)*

*PICUM, 2024, [Exclusion by design: Unveiling unequal treatment and racial inequalities in migration policies](#)*

## Inclusive funding

People with undocumented or precarious status face structural barriers and discrimination when accessing services, even those funded by the EU. A poignant example is the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the only EU fund focusing specifically on the inclusion of migrants. However, its scope of support and financial reporting requirements exclude undocumented migrants from support.

Other barriers exist too within the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which is the main EU instrument for supporting social inclusion, anti-poverty and material aid measures within the EU. While ESF+ does not explicitly exclude undocumented migrants from its scope of support, practical barriers often limit their access. These include national-level reporting requirements often preventing access in practice, and EU level conditions that make access to social inclusion measures dependent on access to the labour market, which undocumented migrants typically lack. For example, beneficiary organisations may be required to provide a social security number or other national registration numbers for service users, which undocumented migrants usually do not have.

Such funding requirements in EU funds not only actively prevent organisations from providing essential services to people in need, but also from helping them resolve their residence status, which is a key cause of their poverty and social exclusion.

Funding programmes supporting the implementation of social policies, including the European Pillar for Social Rights Action Plan, the European Child Guarantee and the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should make sure that access to essential services does not depend on a person's residence or migration status. This can be done by making this **explicit in the scope of support** of the relevant funding regulations, and by ensuring that no additional limitations are added at the national level. Similarly, it is essential that EU and national financial reporting requirements for service providers benefitting from EU funds do not include questions about or proof of residence status.

### Further reading:

*PICUM, 2025, [PICUM's priorities for the next EU long-term budget. Contribution to the European Commission consultation](#)*

*PICUM, 2021, [How do undocumented migrants fare in the new EU funds?](#)*

## Direct involvement of both undocumented and previously undocumented people and civil society organisations

It is important for both undocumented people and those who have been undocumented in the past to be directly consulted for and involved in the design and evaluation of policies that affect people with irregular and insecure residence status, including social policies. This benefits the quality and the effectiveness of the policy, as policy makers and implementers can then take into account the unexpected or unintended negative consequences of past policy decisions and resolve them.

The same goes for the involvement of civil society organisations and service providers, as they bring valuable insight from a service delivery perspective.



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