Housing and homelessness of undocumented migrants across Europe: patterns, barriers, and ways forward

Executive Summary

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Access to appropriate, secure, and sustainable accommodation is a fundamental human right, recognised in international and regional human rights frameworks and applicable to all persons regardless of residence status. Yet across Europe, undocumented migrants are systematically denied access to housing and shelter due to legal, economic, and administrative barriers, often linked to migration control.

The absence of residence permits, work authorisation, and access to social protection creates a vicious cycle that severely limits income opportunities and excludes undocumented migrants from formal housing markets and public services. At the same time, housing provision is increasingly entangled with immigration control mechanisms, deterring access and reinforcing discrimination.

As a result, undocumented migrants are often forced into unsafe, informal, or exploitative housing arrangements, with little access to legal remedies, tenant protections, or emergency accommodation, bearing the burden of exclusionary policies and frameworks. Poor living conditions can have profound effects on health, mental well-being and social inclusion, increasing the risk of marginalisation.

To better understand the situation of undocumented migrants in Europe, PICUM and FEANTSA conducted a collaborative study examining the housing barriers faced by undocumented people across Europe, with particular attention to children, families, and young people. Our report - Housing and homelessness of undocumented migrants across Europe: patterns, barriers, and ways forward - analyses the legal frameworks, structural barriers, and self-organised solutions shaping housing access for undocumented migrants. The report seeks to support rights-based reforms to uphold the right to housing in practice and for all, regardless of residence or migration status.

Barriers to Housing Access

Private Housing

Undocumented migrants and their families are largely excluded from public housing systems and relegated to the margins of the private rental market. Legal and administrative requirements, such as personal identification numbers, social security registrations, and income verification, block access to regulated private rentals in most EU member states.

Primary barriers to private housing include high rental costs (including) in relation to precarious household incomes, lack of documentation, landlord discrimination and exploitation, and legal restrictions tied to residence status. Confined to informal labour markets and earning far less than other workers, undocumented migrants are often charged inflated rents for substandard accommodation.

Even when private housing is secured, conditions are often poor, with inadequate maintenance, lack of basic amenities, and short-term or informal arrangements that leave tenants without bargaining power or access to complaint mechanisms and legal redress. Fear of detection by immigration authorities or losing their accommodation discourages undocumented tenants from reporting abuse or seeking remedies, even where legal avenues exist.

Public Shelters

Access to public shelters and homelessness services is often conditioned on possession of a residence permit, a social security number or municipal registration, denying many undocumented people access. In some cases, national laws explicitly prohibit public organisations from providing services to undocumented people. Registration requirements that undocumented people cannot meet further restrict access. Even where access is formally allowed, shelters often present safety concerns, are overcrowded, have limited capacity, or provide only short-term stays.

Legal barriers are the most commonly cited obstacle, followed by lack of space and inadequate facilities. Family shelters are often insufficient, sometimes forcing parents to be separated from their children, while support typically ends when children reach adulthood. Shelter provision is rarely adapted to the needs of children, families, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or survivors of domestic violence.

Due to these gaps, undocumented migrants rely heavily on NGOs and voluntary organisations to meet their housing needs. NGOs are sought not only because public services are restricted by residence status, but also because they are perceived as safer, more confidential, and more flexible.

Criminalisation and Lack of Safeguards

Restrictive migration control laws and the criminalisation of assistance for undocumented migrants exacerbate housing exclusion. In some countries, landlords risk fines or imprisonment for renting to tenants without regular residence. Anti-smuggling laws aiming at "facilitating" irregular migration and the criminalisation of irregular stay can create legal uncertainty deterring both landlords and support networks from providing accommodation. Even where formal obligations to verify residence status do not exist, landlords and agencies may conduct status checks without the legal obligation to do so.

Similar dynamics shape access to public shelters and homelessness services. Fear of detection, reporting obligations, or deportation discourages people from seeking assistance. The lack of safeguards preventing immigration enforcement authorities from accessing information obtained through essential services (e.g. "firewalls) means that accessing housing or shelter may expose individuals to the risk of deportation, discouraging undocumented migrants from seeking help, even in emergency situations.

Self-Made Solutions

Blocked from formal housing and shelters, undocumented migrants resort to a range of self-organised strategies. These include reliance on friends, family, and diaspora networks ("couch surfing") which may provide temporary shelter but can result in overcrowding and precarious living conditions. Others are forced into rough sleeping in public spaces, parks, and transit stations, with significant safety risks. Informal settlements and encampments emerge in peri-urban or rural areas where access to formal housing is denied. In some cities, undocumented people, often with solidarity support, have used squatting and the occupation of vacant buildings as a means of securing shelter.

These solutions can be marked by insecurity, lack of privacy, and frequent exposure to exploitation and often violent evictions. Increasingly hostile policies criminalise homelessness, exacerbating vulnerabilities and leaving people with no options while deepening the cycle of exclusion.

Policy Gaps and Enforcement Frameworks

Despite growing recognition in international, EU, and national norms of the right to adequate housing, a persistent gap remains between legal entitlements and everyday realities. EU policy instruments, including integration plans, social inclusion and anti-poverty strategies, often fail to explicitly address all those experiencing homelessness, leaving undocumented migrants outside protective and support frameworks. At the same time, immigration control frameworks further criminalise homelessness by linking the absence of a fixed address to migration enforcement outcomes.

The Need for Inclusive Policies and Practices

At EU level, housing must be recognised and operationalised as a fundamental right accessible to all, regardless of residence status, with cohesive policy frameworks aligned with the European Pillar of Social Rights. EU funding streams should be explicitly inclusive of undocumented people, and "facilitation" laws on anti-smuggling and preventing irregular migration must be amended to protect humanitarian support and housing-related transactions from criminalisation.

At national level, legislation should decriminalise providing accommodation to undocumented people, introduce accessible regularisation schemes that do not depend on formal housing, and mandate firewalls between service access and immigration enforcement. A Housing First approach, combined with holistic support addressing regularisation, labour market inclusion, health, and social protection, should be prioritised.

Housing and social service providers should separate residence-status checks from access to services, work in partnership with legal organisations and migrant-led groups to identify structural barriers, and expand outreach and access to rights information.

Conclusion

A decent and safe home should not be conditional on residence status. Homelessness among undocumented migrants is the foreseeable outcome of exclusionary housing, social, and migration policies. Families, children, and young people are particularly affected, as unstable housing undermines access to education, healthcare, work, and social inclusion.

Comprehensive, rights-based reforms at all levels of policy and practice are required to ensure that access to housing and shelter is secured for everyone in Europe. Only then can the EU's commitments to ending homelessness be realised in practice, and human dignity upheld for all residents, regardless of status.