

FOR UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS, MENTAL HEALTH STARTS WITH RESIDENCE PAPERS

Research indicates higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD among undocumented migrants in Europe. This article explores how housing exclusion, homelessness, and immigration detention contribute to this and demonstrates the importance of changing European approaches to migration to improve the mental health of undocumented migrants. It considers recognising housing as a right, decriminalising support, and securing residence status to address mental health inequalities among undocumented migrants.



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Migration status shapes every aspect of a person's life - from work to personal relationships, from housing conditions to the ability to seek health care. With national and EU migration policies largely restricting access to rights and services based on such status, undocumented people are pushed into economic dependence, poverty and abuse, which all create the [conditions](#) for poor mental and physical health.

Despite this, EU policies on mental health are largely oblivious to the challenges faced by undocumented people. For instance, the 2023 European Commission's [Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health](#), mentions nowhere undocumented people or challenges related to living with a precarious residence status.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

[Research](#) from 2022 has found undocumented people face a higher likelihood of experiencing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) when compared to both the general population and documented migrants. For example, in France, a [study](#) showed that one out of six undocumented migrants suffer from PTSD, with a rate at least eight times higher than in the general population. In Austria, a [survey](#) suggests that migration status was a risk factor for mental health problems among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This heightened vulnerability may stem from the stress-inducing conditions prevalent during pre-departure, transit, border-crossing, and reception phases of their journey, and living with irregular migration status in Europe. In certain instances, exposure to various forms of violence has been linked to compromised mental well-being. When people are asked to provide information about their story and journey during migration procedures this can also have a retraumatizing effect. The [constant fear](#) of being caught and deported, for instance through random checks in public spaces, leads to further stress, anxiety, depression, and physical illness for many.

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HOUSING EXCLUSION AND HOMELESSNESS

Undocumented adults, families, and children living in Europe generally experience poor living conditions, with limited access to adequate housing.

Social housing and the formal rental market often remain inaccessible to many undocumented people who may then fall prey to slumlords or end up in homelessness. In Brussels, for example, up to [70% of homeless people](#) sheltered and supported by humanitarian emergency service Samusocial are undocumented. In France, a [study](#) from 2021 found an over-representation of people in irregular situations among those experiencing homelessness, in emergency accommodation, in slums or in poor housing conditions. Furthermore, a study by the Abbe Pierre Foundation concluded that the deliberate choice made by the state to deny residence permits to undocumented people leads to rights violations and poor housing. Many undocumented people experience discrimination in the housing market, live in cramped, inadequate, and expensive housing, and are relegated to spatially segregated accommodation.

In some European countries, [landlords can be criminalised](#) for renting accommodation to undocumented people, which further restricts people's options to access decent housing. This is, in many member states, due to the transposition of the EU Facilitation Directive, which requires EU member states to adopt 'effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions' against people found to 'facilitate' irregular migration. Because the Directive does not explicitly exclude normal interactions between people and transactions without undue financial profit, renting accommodation to undocumented people can also be considered a criminal offence. In some countries, landlords are even required to check the immigration status of tenants before renting out. Because of these criminalisation frameworks, undocumented tenants tend to be more vulnerable to exploitative landlords and may be unable to access complaint mechanisms to hold landlords to account. All of this often results in poor housing conditions.

The combined pressure of living undocumented or with an insecure status, together with housing insecurity and experiences of homelessness, has a significant impact on people's mental health.

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IMMIGRATION DETENTION

Immigration detention of children, families, people who have suffered torture, violence or trafficking in human beings, people with mental and physical health problems, and people with disabilities is a widespread practice throughout Europe. Many people develop poor mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as a consequence of detention itself. People in immigration detention are found to suffer from [anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

When examining Home Office policies affecting the welfare of immigration detainees in the United Kingdom, independent expert Stephan Shaw, former Prisons and Probation Ombudsman for England and Wales, [wrote](#): 'No issue caused me more concern during the course of this review than mental health.' Another [survey](#) in the UK found an average of very high levels of depression in four of every five people in immigration detention. Similar trends can be found across the European Union.

A [study](#) by the Jesuit Refugee Service Europe based on 680 one-on-one interviews shows that even short periods of detention increase individuals' position of vulnerability. Eighty-seven per cent of people interviewed said that psychological assistance was not available to them in detention. In Poland, following the attempted suicide of a resident in the Przemysl immigration detention centre, around 70 people went on a [hunger strike](#) from 05-09 September 2023, protesting against their detention and mistreatment.

MIGRATION POLICIES AND HEALTH

EU and national-level policies on migration go in the direction of more harm and less support for undocumented people. For example, the EU Migration Pact, a set of legislative instruments and policy proposals that are supposed to reform the European migration and asylum system, will most likely lead to [increased immigration detention](#), including that of [children](#), and faster deportations. Adopted in December 2023, the Pact pays little to no attention to enforcing or expanding access to residence permits, services and support for undocumented people.

At the national level, multiple measures and proposals have been made by governments in recent months that curb access to decent housing and restrict mental health support for undocumented migrants. In France, a new [draft immigration law](#) risks to severely restrict health care coverage for undocumented people and access to residence permits for medical reasons. In [Sweden](#), the government is considering to oblige health care professionals to report undocumented patients to law and immigration enforcement. In [Belgium](#), the Flemish Minister for Housing proposed to bar undocumented people from renting any accommodation following the terrorist attack in Brussels on 16 October 2023.

All these measures cause real harm for people with no or precarious status, and only add to existing deeper inequalities.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM

The mental health impact of inequalities experienced by undocumented people show how it is essential to respect undocumented migrants' right to housing.

Practically, this means decriminalising support to undocumented migrants, including renting out accommodation and facilitating access to shelters. It also means ensuring that people will not face immigration enforcement as a result of accessing housing, health and other services, including by implementing strict data protection safeguards so that service providers' data is not accessible or used for immigration enforcement purposes. It means rolling out initiatives to improve housing conditions and the availability of shelters for those living on the streets or in insecure accommodation.

Ultimately, [strengthening mental health and wellbeing](#) can only be achieved if we radically transform the current approach to migration, including and beyond housing, by prioritising access to secure residence status through the development of regular migration pathways on a range of grounds, and the implementation of [regularisation measures](#).