

Feedback from undocumented migrants on their living conditions in Belgium

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As part of the MORE project, an analysis of the consequences of return and readmission policies was carried out in Belgium based on the perceptions and experiences of migrants at risk of deportation, in order to better understand the effects of these policies on living conditions.

The new Belgian government has stated its intention to increase the number of forced returns and to focus services on voluntary return, which has created a climate of fear that is not conducive to tolerance towards undocumented migrants, who are often criminalised and increasingly marginalised. Furthermore, the deployment of Frontex agents, who are authorised to carry out interceptions at stations and airports and to escort migrants in the context of forced returns, is a further sign of the desire for repression, combined with an increase in places in closed centres and the planned possibility of home visits¹.

¹ Federal coalition agreement 2025-2029, pp. 172-176 https://www.belgium.be/sites/default/files/resources/publication/files/accord_gouvernemental-Bart_De_Wever_fr.pdf

This feedback has highlighted a deterioration in the living conditions of migrants at risk of deportation due to a reduction in their rights and increased control of undocumented migrants on the territory.

In terms of employment, some of the migrants interviewed expressed strong discouragement due to the low prospects of obtaining a work permit, which further destabilises their stay during the regularisation period. In a context where undocumented migrants do not have the right to work², most find undeclared work through parallel networks and are often exploited. This issue is only discussed with social workers and support structures in cases of difficulty (non-payment of wages, accidents at work, human trafficking, etc.).

With regard to education, some parents encounter significant difficulties in supporting their children's schooling due to a lack of knowledge of the language or even illiteracy for those who did not attend school in their country of origin. They are not always able to read and understand communications, fill in administrative documents or help their children with their homework, not to mention the significant limitations in access to educational support services such as speech therapy.

Housing remains one of the central issues for people in irregular situations. When applying for asylum, people are housed in FEDASIL reception centres, the federal reception centre for people seeking international protection, which also provide material assistance. If their application for international protection is rejected, they are legally required to leave the centre and find themselves homeless. In addition, Belgium has been experiencing an unprecedented reception crisis since 2021. The Belgian state is unable to guarantee accommodation for all

² Royal Decree of 2 September 2018 implementing the Law of 9 May 2018 on the employment of foreign nationals in a special residence situation

those seeking international protection³. Since the beginning of 2025, the average waiting time has been between three and four months. On 8 September 2025, more than 1,900 asylum seekers were on the waiting list without being able to benefit from a place in a reception centre from the first day of their application. As registration on the waiting list is not automatic, the total number of applicants who are not accommodated is unknown⁴. During these months of waiting, the situation of these people is very precarious. Some turn to acquaintances or emergency humanitarian accommodation, while others have no choice but to turn to squats or the streets. Furthermore, migrants who apply for regularisation find themselves on the traditional rental market, which is already saturated. They then face great difficulties in finding accommodation.

This leads to extremely precarious housing situations, with undocumented migrants being forced to fend for themselves. The field study highlighted that ethnic communities develop mutual aid and support networks among their members and organise themselves to share information. Across the country, undocumented migrants are organising collective political action in several Belgian cities, particularly to address the issue of housing, with the support of local associations and public authorities.

In terms of health, the lack of a legal address is a problem because social services require it to issue an emergency medical card, one of the only rights granted to people in an irregular situation. In addition, NGOs providing support to migrants report difficulties in accessing healthcare due to the cumbersome and lengthy procedure for applying for a medical card. However, most migrants interviewed seem generally well informed about the steps to be taken and start the process early enough to be able to benefit from it. The 2025 government

³ <https://accueil-migration.croix-rouge.be/accueillir/>

⁴ <https://www.myria.be/fr/publications/crise-de-laccueil-myria-et-linstitut-federal-des-droits-humains-alertent-sur-un-recul-des-droits>

agreement nevertheless provides for restrictions on the coverage of certain types of care, such as dental care⁵.

In conclusion, the feedback from migrants without residence permits highlights the significant negative impact of current return and readmission policies on the living conditions of migrants in an irregular situation in Belgium. The emphasis on control, repression and the restriction of rights increases precariousness and undermines access to housing, education and healthcare. Despite significant forms of community and associative solidarity, living conditions are deteriorating and increasing the vulnerability of people without legal status. Alternatives to detention offer some positive avenues, but remain insufficient given the scale of needs and the risks of increased forced returns.

⁵ Federal Coalition Agreement 2025-2029, p. 183

https://www.belgium.be/sites/default/files/resources/publication/files/accord_gouvernemental-Bart_De_Wever_fr.pdf