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Motivations, experiences and consequences of returns and readmissions policy: revealing and developing effective alternatives



National Summary Report

Experiences, expectations and views of migrants and professionals in the field around RR and alternative policies

Case Study: Germany

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This document provides a concise summary of the key findings of **MORE Project WP5 in Germany**. For detailed analysis, evidence, and comprehensive insights, please refer to the full report. The information in this summary should not be considered complete or fully representative of the entire study.

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Introduction

This national WP5 report makes clear the consequences of Return and Readmission (RR) policies for the daily lives and social worlds of migrants at risk of return. On the empirical basis of 30 interviews and 3 focus-group discussions conducted between March and June 2025,¹ it shows that RR policies, the risk of return itself, as well as the precarity resulting from present-day insecurity of status are widely experienced as an existential threat by migrants at risk of return in Germany.

Our sample of 17 interviews conducted with migrants at risk of return holding a range of different insecure and irregular statuses makes clear that this risk of return also affects migrant workers who lose their job, students, others in transitional periods of their life, as well as inner-EU migrants—that is, not just refugees.

Our sample shows, both the looming as well as acute threat of return triggers intense stress and fear in everyday life, impeding a sense of safety and security—itsself endangering integration. This negative impact is experienced in all areas of daily life due to the fact that holding insecure/irregular status entails hurdles and restrictions concerning housing, employment, education, and healthcare. This summary report will present our main findings—which relate in many aspects to those of already-existing research on these matters—and show how RR policies trigger a downward social spiral for many migrants living in Germany.

Additionally, our WP5 research is able to show that migrants at risk and the actors supporting them identify and turn to various strategies and possibilities that aim at counteracting exclusion. Therefore, highlighted as well in the following is how (migrant and nonmigrant) civil society actors, as well as migrants at risk themselves, are key to facilitating inclusion in the face of the recently adopted RR policies, pointing to how a solidarity-based society can be nurtured.

¹ 17 interviews conducted with migrants at risk of return, 13 interviews with supporting actors, as well as 3 focus-group discussions (2 with supporting actors and 1 with migrants at risk of return).

Return and Readmission Policies Produce Precarity and a Downward Social Spiral

In all 17 interviews, migrants at risk shared how they are perpetually beset by feelings of uncertainty. The common denominator here, then, was how holding insecure/irregular status affects all areas of everyday life: housing, employment, education, and healthcare. No matter how different in nature each case is, this overall legal precarity triggers an acute sense of instability, which weighs negatively on those living under it.

In accordance with the literature, the uncertainty coming with having no proper legal status was perceived as a lack and loss of control by our interlocutors too, impeding the making of concrete plans for the future (Schütze 2023; Castañeda 2010; Mitrić 2009). This absence of guarantees about a legal, safe future becomes even more intense, as our sample shows, as a consequence of the administrative and legal system being largely perceived as complex, a bureaucratic blackbox, and a maze by those concerned (see also, Schwarz 2012). Interactions with implementing actors such as the Foreigner Office are for the most part daunting due to the language barrier in combination with a strongly felt anti-migrant sentiment. The submission of identity documents, the proof of income or liquidity, as well as restriction of accommodation to the official camps alone are experienced as additional sources of malaise. Compliance with the authorities is thus described as one of the biggest challenges, because this can lead to deportation; noncompliance can trigger sanctions, leading to even greater exclusion.²

Additionally, a lack of sound housing is linked to holding the insecure Duldung (“toleration of stay”) status.³ In the context of flight-migration, interlocutors criticized places of accommodation for their isolated geographical location, forced proximity to strangers,

² For example, the 2019 Orderly Return Law introduced a new status called “tolerated stay for people with unclear identity” that increases pressure on migrants to organize a passport. This new status offers even fewer rights, despite the already precarious “tolerated stay” entailing reductions in benefits as well as restrictions on freedom of movement. Additionally, being of “unclear identity” has been a reason for exclusion from residency under all right-to-stay regulations since the latter’s inception in 2015. Furthermore, “identity concealment” is a reason for detention.

³ The German legal landscape upholds this special (non)status. It is applied to a range of persons without legal status, when deportation measures are for various reasons temporarily placed on hold and certain other conditions met. Duldung is defined under §60a of the Residence Act (Aufenthaltsgesetz, AufenthG), but it is not a residence permit due to the fact that the so-called obligation to leave the country (Ausreisepflicht) remains in effect legally speaking. Duldung (non)status offers a bare minimum level of protection and living standards in Germany.

crowdedness, as well as lack of privacy and space (see also, Hess et al. 2018). The lack of safe, affordable, and adequate housing was deemed problematic by most migrants at risk of return and supporting actors alike. Furthermore, for some it seems impossible to move into a private flat, because conveying economic stability to potential landlords, therewith earning a rental contract, is beyond them due to the combination of insecure legal status and the lack of a work permit.

The precarity of status that they live under is experienced by migrants as restricting access to employment. Holding the (non)status of Duldung, even when permission to work is granted by the Immigration Office, is a hurdle to employment—something often described by other researchers (Scheu et al. 2020; Struck 2017). Beyond the bureaucratic process behind approval to work, the only brief period of validity makes the holders hereof very undesirable employees in the eyes of employers. Being fired due to an expiring toleration of stay as well as subsequently struggling to find a (new) job were described as common occurrences, also endangering the residence permit based on holding work (Riedner 2018) or pathways from Duldung into the right to stay, similarly based on gainful employment. The WP5 fieldwork revealed that most migrants at risk of return have taken up either formal or informal forms of employment (at times both); many have also experienced exploitative working conditions (see also, Birke 2022).

A few interviewees viewed access to healthcare positively in Germany, referring to the lack of comparable services in their respective countries of origin. Others deemed both the bureaucratic hurdles and lack of treatment in times of acute need to be key issues (Biddle 2024; Gottlieb & Schülle 2020). The mental and emotional strain caused by the insecure status itself is a dominant and recurring theme throughout the entire sample. Witnessing and/or knowing of deportations and/or deportation attempts (of friends, relatives, neighbors) were largely described as traumatic incidents triggering lasting fear and stress. The WP5 research highlights how holding irregular and insecure status combined with the looming or acute threat of return negatively impacts the well-being of those concerned, in many cases leading to a severe decline in their mental health. As can be seen, the precarity experienced across all levels of daily life causes a downward social spiral stretching beyond just the legally produced exclusion.

The high stress levels arising herewith negatively impact the ability to concentrate and focus on learning. Therefore, educational hurdles may not only arise from external restrictions connected to one's current legal status but also due to the latter's detrimental impact on the mental state of those otherwise very adept and open to learning.



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Additionally, the interviews prove again that holding irregular status negatively impacts the ability to invest in social connections. Migrants at risk expressed the same sentiment time and again: they would not speak about and share their struggles around irregular status with their families in countries of origin to stop them worrying and hence to avoid causing distress to far-away relatives. They reported that their status struggles undermine their interpersonal relationships as well, because such uncertainty is unwittingly transferred or those in question start to isolate themselves due to the difficulty of the situation. Additionally, a lack of access to social spaces was noted by many migrants due to their racist exclusion from cafés, restaurants, and clubs. However, socializing in public spaces such as squares and parks puts especially young migrant men at high risk of the police being called and subsequent criminalization.

Another downward spiral that became readily apparent during our WP5 research concerned inner-EU migrants and others coming to Germany without access to social assistance, with those concerned ending up homeless, in debt, and falling into addiction.

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Strategies against Precarity and Alternatives to RR Policies

Migrants at risk and supporting actors turn to a range of strategic alternatives in aiming to counteract the described forms of exclusion. The researched alternatives to RR policies can be typologized around: (1) legal protection; (2) preventing deportation; and (3) facilitating access to society.

Many of those spoken with confirmed the high hurdles to regularization already described in the WP2 summary report, with our research here making clear once again that migrants actively seek access to such pathways.

In Germany, a number of public campaigns and a broad coalition of migrant support groups have sought to prevent deportations from taking place at the point of enforcement. Actions taken to this end range from blockades (Doppler 2015), monitoring, and campaign-oriented initiatives through practices like offering church asylum (Asyl in der Kirche e.V. 2003). Some of these practices simply aim to prevent a particular instance of enforcement, striving to give those affected more time to find a pathway into the right to stay.

Other endeavors are intended to facilitate improved access to socioeconomic rights and to society at large. In pursuit of social inclusion against the backdrop of the described RR policies, networks of support play a vital role in helping those impacted find (informal) work, housing, orientation in daily life, and stress relief. Accordingly, community-based networks are central for establishing roots in Germany. Some actors create contact zones to help overcome isolation, offer individual support, or make access to healthcare possible—often based on cooperation between civil society and municipalities. These alternative approaches to handling the repercussions of irregular legal status as well as to (social) rights will be further analyzed in the WP7 summary report.

Conclusion

The WP5 research illuminates, then, how all areas of everyday life for migrants at risk of return are negatively impacted by RR policies. As demonstrated, the looming or acute threat of return triggers intense stress and fear, impeding a sense of safety and security. This makes very clear how RR policies themselves are the leading hurdle to integration. Aspirations around one's future are difficult to envision beyond the immediate goal of regularization and toiling under fewer socioeconomic restrictions in everyday life. Being caught up in a hierarchical, nontransparent administrative system dominated by a structural mistrust of migrants has generated a widespread sense of being stripped of fundamental freedoms and rights among migrants at risk of return.

But that is not all: Our sample also shows how RR policies can trigger a downward social spiral, not only hindering integration but also in many instances producing a form of destitution and destroying mental health—as conditions themselves endangering the well-being of society. But instead of addressing these social issues by creating safe living conditions, the upheavals generated hereby are met with a right-wing, populist debate calling for closed borders and more detention.

This status quo is thus often the starting point for supporting actors' engagement. Namely, to prevent deportations from taking place, enable pathways to social integration, as well as ensure legal protection and access to socioeconomic rights, in striving to counteract the structural restrictions and forms of exclusion realized by RR policies.

Nevertheless, the widespread insecurity felt by all our migrant interlocutors makes plain how a public debate reduced to addressing flight-migration alone is misguided and deeply unhelpful in being populist, simplistic, and beyond the realm of facts. Our sample shows, rather, that RR policies affect not only refugees but also workers, students, and inner-EU migrants. Accordingly, solutions at the level of legislation, counseling, and case management must be pluralistic if they are to adequately respond to these individuals' highly diverse needs.