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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: Spain

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This document provides a concise summary of the key findings of **MORE Project WP5 in Spain**. 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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1. Introduction

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between January and June 2025, this executive summary reviews the experiences, expectations, and views of in situations of administrative irregularity and those supporting them. Fieldwork participants include irregularised people from countries such as Paraguay, Peru, Honduras, the Philippines, Morocco, Turkey, Senegal, Gambia and Pakistan. Supporting actors include social workers, volunteers, lawyers, and activists. This totals to 38 participants, 17 people at risk of deportation and 21 supporting actors. The aim of the fieldwork conducted is to understand the lived experiences of administrative irregularity resulting from returns and readmissions policies, capturing how legal frameworks and requisites, as well as their enforcement, shape people's lives in practice, illustrating how individuals become irregularised, who benefits from this condition, and how irregularisation is sustained by policy and bureaucratic practice.

Overall, findings reveal that while the threat of return generates fear and anxiety, it is often overshadowed by more immediate concerns such as, precariousness, destitution, violence and abuse suffered due to being irregularised, lacking normalised access to rights and welfare support. Both voluntary and forced return were perceived as remote and undesirable, mainly due to the dangers anticipated in their countries of origin and the significant social and personal costs associated with returning.

Furthermore, despite Spain offering a permanent mechanism for regularisation, it was found that irregularised people faced significant barriers to access it. Most significantly, the very fact of being irregularised made it more difficult for them to fulfil the requirements for regularisation, creating a paradoxical cycle of exclusion. Further complicating this cycle was the chronic underfunding and institutional neglect of the public bodies responsible for managing regularisation processes, which led to prolonged delays, extending periods of irregularity and further entrenching precariousness.

This executive summary illustrates the experiences of foreigners living in Spain in a situation of administrative irregularity, who are subject to detention, deportation, and return programmes. It also reflects the perspectives of those who support them in meeting basic needs, accessing rights and services, or working toward regularisation. Through its main findings, the report highlights how policy frameworks and bureaucratic practices contribute to the ongoing irregularisation and exclusion embedded in Spain's immigration system.

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2. Evidence and analysis

Accessing housing and work as the two main obstacles faced in daily life, complicating access to regularisation and leading to precarious living conditions.

Irregularised people experienced precarious living conditions, particularly during periods of without regular administrative status. The primary driver of these difficulties was the inability to access stable employment and secure housing, both of which were directly constrained by irregularisation.

Many interviewees reported earning salaries well below Spain's minimum wage (approximately €7.40 per hour). This is epitomised by one of the participants (PR-06) who earned €300 monthly working 12-hour shifts at a supermarket while her husband earned just €300 per month caring for a herd of cows from dawn to sunset. Beyond wage exploitation, the participant also endured racist and xenophobic behaviour in the workplace, including verbal and physical abuse from her employer. Despite this treatment, she did not report the abuse due to her dependency on the employer, who continuously promised her a future contract, essential for regularisation. This precarious employment situation was compounded by severe housing instability: her family of four was forced to constantly move between small, rented rooms, with rents that changed at the whims of sublessors, and often living in unsanitary conditions with rat and cockroach infestations.

These situations were common among participants. Many were dependent on employers' and landlords' potential 'good will' to navigate bureaucratic hurdles key to regularisation such as registration at the *padrón*¹ or access to an official pre-contract. This dependency forced them to comply with labour exploitation and enduring poor living conditions, hoping that compliance would eventually allow them to regularise.

Bureaucratic violence can lead to a sustained irregularity and even potentially unlawful deportations.

People in irregular administrative situation faced a great amount of bureaucratic violence. This occurs when public bodies spread misinformation, become overwhelmed with cases, or fail to coordinate on regularisation processes, which is commonly the case. These systemic failures trap those in situations of administrative irregularity, forcing them into precarious conditions and risking deportation, creating a form of quotidian violence grown out of bureaucratic processes.

As official channels did not provide straightforward ways of accessing up-to-date information, those participants who had informal support networks would receive some information about bureaucratic processes from family and friends. Conversely, those without networks were especially vulnerable to misinformation. Yet, those with support networks would often receive outdated information based on experience in a context of rapidly evolving legal frameworks, therefore, informal networks were not able to

¹ Municipal registration, essential to prove residence in Spain when applying for almost all regularisation pathways.



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make up for the failings of information availability on bureaucratic processes concerning irregularised migrants.

This is critical as that people were often unaware of crucial bureaucratic processes needed for regularisation, losing crucial time and protracting time lived without regular status. This is illustrated by one of the participants who was unable to apply for *arraigo*² because she did not know she had to renew her *padrón* every two years: *“No one told me like, ‘Hey, you need to renew your registration’. I got lost because of that. That’s why I’m having all these problems now, because I didn’t know I had to renew it, and by the time I found out, it was too late”* (PR-08).

As we see, bureaucratic processes needed to achieve regularisation tend to be cumbersome and lengthy. Both supporting actors and irregularised migrants described situations where bureaucratic requirements became so tedious and absurd that they ultimately delayed or blocked regularisation. The most evident instance of this was already pointed at by judges in WP5 and confirmed by the lawyers interviewed. Lawyers and judges interviewed for the research described cases where people were deported before their deportation appeal hearing was held: *“You are fighting with the state structure, the same one that is deporting the foreigner, and the foreigner has already been expelled, and nobody bothers to inform you”* (SA-05). The enforcement of deportations before appeal hearings are held speaks less to the slowness of judicial proceedings than to the undermining of the right to defence. Moreover, it further highlights the severity of deportation as a sanction for an administrative infraction.

Irregular status as a form of social control.

Overall, participants viewed forced return and deportation as part of a broader system of oppression that kept them vulnerable. Though deportation felt less tangible than immediate daily struggles like securing food and housing, the threat still shaped their behaviours, especially regarding police avoidance. In fact, several participants described daily mobility as a risk, as they were frequently stopped for identity checks during their commute, heightening the risk of receiving an expulsion order. These patterns are well-known by people in irregular administrative situations, as an interviewed activist explained: *“you already know places where there might be more police, so you avoid those places”* (SA-04).

This was particularly pronounced for non-white men using commuter trains and other public transport in metropolitan areas of major cities who felt the need to shape their own behaviour to avoid surveillance. This pattern illustrates the racialised and gendered undertones of police control highlighted in WP5. Young North African men especially reported extensive self-policing during transit, describing how they monitored their clothing choices, avoided traveling in large groups, and maintained discrete behaviour: *‘I don’t look for trouble and I don’t look like I am looking for trouble’* (PR-16). Another interviewee explained that while he was without status he knew to avoid things that could lead to encounters with the police, like going to clubs at night or doing drugs and now, as a social worker supporting other people in administrative irregularity, he also advised irregularised people to avoid these things in order to minimise the threat of deportation (SA-18). Their experiences illustrate the intersectional nature of these experiences, highlighting how gender, age, and

² Genera name given to all the regularisation pathways that rely on proving rootedness in Spain.



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racialisation intersect to create specific experiences of 'danger' and 'vulnerability' for those without regular administrative status.

Presenting as a 'good migrant' to show compliance with state laws and authorities in daily practices.

Most interviewees made considerable efforts to follow rules and regulations while gathering documents to regularise their administrative situation in Spain, carefully avoiding any actions that might jeopardise this process. In this way, the need to be a 'good migrant', understood as abiding by the law and striving to live an exemplary life within the constraints of precarious conditions, emerges. It should be noted that participants did not use this terminology explicitly; however, there was a consistent pattern in interviews of emphasising lawful intentions and compliance.

Expectations are critical. For many, presenting oneself as a 'good migrant' is essential to survival. Participants believed they had to demonstrate their worth so that Spanish society would view them positively and challenge existing prejudices about immigrants. These prejudices included criminalising discourses around migration, assumptions that migrants abuse welfare systems, and employers' reluctance to hire irregular migrants due to fears of being reported to authorities by their own employees. These 'good migrant' behaviours become particularly crucial in employment contexts, where migrants actively seek future contracts that can be presented for 'arraigo' applications. This creates an intentional performance of loyalty toward employers, which paradoxically enables the exploitation and abuse described earlier. Irregularised migrants endure these conditions with the hope of eventually being rewarded and recognised as 'good migrants' worthy of legal status.

This 'good migrant' performance also connects to the self-policing behaviours described earlier regarding mobility on public transport. Young North African men felt pressure to self-police because they are disproportionately criminalised in public discourses. Consequently, they had to extend their 'good migrant' performance even further when going about their daily life.

Perceiving oneself as a 'good migrant' also led to feelings of deservingness toward regularisation. This created frustration and confusion when regularisation was denied despite their considerable efforts to be recognised as a 'good migrant' and compile proof of citizenry and incorporation. Being without regular administrative status forced participants into illegal situations, contradicting their desire to do things 'the right way.' Many expressed physical and emotional distress at feeling this was beyond their control, as they felt forced to breach certain aspects of the law to survive by working or driving without the due permits despite all their efforts being directed to achieving regular status to do these same activities lawfully: *'They make it very difficult for people like us who work and try to move forward'* (PR-08).

Family, friends, and other support actors as essential for the survival of migrants with an irregular status.

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Informal support networks such as family, friends and others, including support professionals like lawyers, social workers and community advocates, are key to mitigating precarious living conditions. Support networks pass on information regarding bureaucracy and law, they provide possible housing and even contacts for work. They also create important mechanisms of resistance, such as channels of communication that share real-time information about where police raids are taking place, thus helping migrants who are worried about police encounters and the possibility of deportation fight these systemic pressures.

At the same time, as most people in irregularised situations were dependent on family and friends, the unregulated nature of these networks meant they could also potentially contribute to the perpetuation of precariousness mainly through exploitative labour and housing conditions.

Concluding remarks

The perspective of return and the shadow of deportation, while creating a pervasive sense of risk that deeply impacted participants physical and mental well-being, as well as their day-to-day behaviour was often overshadowed by immediate survival concerns. In this way, sustained irregularity, and the precarious living conditions it creates, emerges as a central finding. Bureaucratic obstacles, unstable legal statuses, and paradoxical requirements, particularly evident in the process of registration (*padrón*), perpetuate precarious conditions and normalise exploitation and abuse of people in situations of administrative irregularity in Spain.

The experiences revealed by this research are shaped by intersecting factors of gender, age, and racialisation. This was most visible in the case of young North African men, who were the participants that most often expressed fear of deportation and engaged in extensive self-policing behaviours to avoid drawing attention from law enforcement. Meanwhile, gendered patterns of exploitation affected women differently, particularly in domestic and service sectors where they endured abuse while seeking the legal contracts necessary for regularisation.

Furthermore, the importance of supportive social connections and others' unpredictable 'good will' for escaping precarity and irregularity is also highlighted by the results. Family, friends, and supporting actors emerged as essential for participants' survival. Similarly performing as a 'good migrant' became a recurrent strategy in participants' approach to daily life and interactions within Spain beyond encounters with law enforcement authorities to present as deserving of this unpredictable 'good will' that proved crucial for survival.

The findings presented in this research evidence and underscore how Spain's current policies create structural conditions that paradoxically prolong irregular status and perpetuate extreme precarity, rather than facilitate return, as most participants rejected return as a viable option. The socioeconomic debt created by migration, fear of general or personal violence and uprootedness from the country of origin made return unthinkable and deportation a looming threat.

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