I-CLA!M

Improving the Living and Labour Conditions of Irregularised Migrant Households in Europe

Immigration Policy and Precarious Migrant Labour in the UK

Policy Brief

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Introduction

The I-CLAIM project investigates the living and working conditions of migrant households with precarious legal status in Europe. In the UK, migrant irregularity is not simply the result of unauthorised entry or individual rule breaking. Rather, it is actively produced and reproduced through a policy environment that, over the past two decades, has expanded immigration enforcement into the everyday spaces of work, housing, public services, education and policing (Piemontese & Sigona, 2024).

UK immigration law and policy have created what I-CLAIM researchers describe as an "irregularity assemblage" (Sigona & van Liempt, 2025): a system in which legal rules, bureaucratic procedures, employers, digital infrastructures and public narratives converge to make migrants' legal status increasingly precarious. In this system, policies do not simply restrict rights; they can also generate irregularity by design. Escalating visa costs, rigid sponsorship systems, and data-sharing across institutions all contribute to situations where migrants lose status or struggle to maintain lawful residence.

This policy architecture is reinforced by the way migration is framed in political and media debates. Our analysis of the Narrative Construction of Migrant Irregularity in the UK (Piemontese, 2025) shows that migration is increasingly discussed through a binary distinction between legality and illegality, with heavy reliance on imagery of "small boats", numerical indicators, and moralised distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" migrants. These narratives shape public understanding of migration and help legitimise increasingly restrictive policies while narrowing the space for rights-based discussions.

Public perceptions are also shaped by limited and uneven knowledge about migration. Evidence from our survey on Public Understanding and Attitudes to Irregular Migration in the UK (Lessard-Phillips & Sigona, 2025) shows that many people misunderstand how irregular migration actually occurs, often assuming it results primarily from unauthorised border crossings rather than visa overstays, bureaucratic barriers, or employer-linked migration regimes.

Against this backdrop, the I-CLAIM project has conducted two in-depth studies of migrant work in the food delivery and domestic work sectors. These sectors illustrate how immigration policies interact with labour market structures to shape everyday working conditions. Research on irregularised migrant workers in the UK food delivery sector (Sigona, Piemontese, Achi, & Soares Mendes, 2025) shows how delivery riders operate at the intersection of algorithmic management and intensified immigration enforcement targeting "illegal working". Meanwhile, research on irregularised migrants in domestic work (Sigona, Piemontese, Soares Mendes, & Achi, 2025) highlights how restrictive visa routes and sponsorship systems channel migrant workers into isolation, overwork and, in some cases, situations resembling forced labour.

These findings reveal a clear pattern: the UK policy environment does not merely fail to prevent exploitation — it can structurally enable it. By criminalising border crossings, restricting access to work and services, embedding immigration checks into everyday life, and denying safe reporting mechanisms, the current system traps many irregularised migrants in situations where exploitation becomes widespread and accountability difficult. Migrants are often punished for the very precarity that state policies help to produce.

This policy brief draws on key findings from I-CLAIM research in the UK, as well as insights from conversations with migrant activists, trade unions, legal practitioners and civil society organisations. It sets out a series of recommendations for improving the living and working conditions of irregularised migrant workers and their families.

Migrants have long been central to the UK's workforce and labour movement. Today they make up around one fifth of the UK labour force (Fernández-Reino & Brindle, 2025). Yet the current migration system undermines their rights, autonomy and ability to build stable lives. The UK urgently needs a migration and labour framework that protects people rather than weaponising legal status, and that enables all workers — regardless of where they were born — to live and work with dignity and security (JCWI, 2024).

1. Main research findings

1.1. The UK's legal and policy infrastructure actively produces irregularity

Irregular migration in the UK is not simply an accidental outcome of unauthorised entry. Rather, it is often the predictable result of interacting regulatory frameworks across immigration, labour and welfare systems. The combination of the Hostile Environment, the post-Brexit Points-Based System (PBS), and administrative pathways into status loss, creates structural pressures that push migrants into precarious or unlawful forms of residence.

Several mechanisms are particularly significant.

First, Hostile Environment policies have extended immigration enforcement into everyday life by delegating immigration checks to employers, landlords, banks, universities, local authorities and healthcare providers. This dispersal of enforcement increases the risk that bureaucratic errors, delays or misunderstandings can trigger loss of status and exclusion from services.

Second, the absence of safe reporting mechanisms means that migrants who experience labour exploitation, wage theft or violent crime often avoid contacting authorities for fear of immigration enforcement. This undermines labour inspections, weakens protections against modern slavery and trafficking, and ultimately compromises public safety.

Third, high visa costs, the Immigration Health Surcharge and restrictive sponsorship rules make it financially difficult for many low-paid migrants to maintain lawful status. Workers who entered the UK legally may fall into irregularity because they cannot afford renewal costs, lose their job, or become trapped in abusive employment relationships tied to sponsorship.

Fourth, post-Brexit changes have created new risks of irregularisation for EU citizens who were unable to successfully apply to the EU Settlement Scheme or to demonstrate continuous residence. This group remains largely invisible in public debates about irregular migration.

Finally, asylum reforms increasingly link asylum to "illegality", leaving people in prolonged limbo and at risk of removal with limited rights of appeal.

1.2. Dominant public narratives construct irregularity through borders, criminalisation, and deservingness

Public and political debates play a central role in shaping migration policy. Our analysis of media, political and civil society narratives shows that irregular migration in the UK is frequently framed through a narrow discourse centred on border control and moral judgements about deservingness.

Across the political spectrum and media landscape, coverage disproportionately focuses on small boat crossings and enforcement measures, while the structural drivers of irregularity — such as visa overstays, bureaucratic barriers or employer-linked status loss — receive much less attention. This framing reinforces the perception that irregular migration is primarily a matter of border security.

Within this discourse, the figure of the "illegal migrant" functions as a moral counterpoint to the "deserving migrant". Political narratives frequently contrast skilled workers, key workers or "legal migrants" with irregular migrants portrayed as burdens or threats. This moral distinction helps legitimise restrictive policies and normalises the withdrawal of rights.

Media portrayals also reproduce gendered and racialised stereotypes. Irregular migrant men are often depicted as threatening or criminal, while women are portrayed primarily as victims of sexual violence or as mothers. Such portrayals reduce complex experiences to simplified archetypes and obscure the structural conditions shaping migration and labour markets.

Civil society organisations often challenge these narratives by highlighting exploitation and structural drivers of irregularity. However, counter-narratives frequently rely on arguments about migrants' economic contribution or humanitarian deservingness. While politically pragmatic, these strategies can unintentionally reproduce the same deservingness framework that underpins restrictive policies.

Overall, the narrative environment narrows the range of politically acceptable policy responses and makes rights-based reforms more difficult to advance.

1.3. Public perceptions of irregular migration are marked by knowledge gaps, racialised **preferences, and ambivalent pragmatism**

Survey evidence from 1,147 UK adults shows that public understanding of irregular migration is fragmented, uneven and strongly shaped by dominant political and media narratives.

A majority of respondents significantly overestimated the number of irregular migrants living in the UK. Many assumed that irregular migration primarily results from unauthorised border crossings rather than administrative pathways such as visa overstays or sponsorship breakdowns.

Attitudes were strongly influenced by age, political affiliation and ideology. Older respondents and voters aligned with Conservative or Reform parties were significantly more likely to perceive irregular migration as a major threat and to associate asylum seekers with illegality.

The survey also revealed racialised preferences in employment scenarios. When respondents were asked whether they would hire an irregular migrant care worker, factors such as longer residence in the UK, family ties and positive references increased acceptance. However, candidates from Nigeria and Bangladesh were consistently less preferred than candidates from Moldova, revealing how migration governance intersects with racialised hierarchies in labour markets.

Finally, respondents' attitudes varied depending on social context. While most people expressed little concern about encountering irregular migrants in public settings such as shops or public transport, discomfort increased sharply when imagining irregular migrants working inside their homes. This finding highlights how private domestic spaces remain symbolically sensitive sites in debates about migrant labour.

1.4. In domestic work and domiciliary care, immigration status directly enables exploitation and housing control mechanisms

Research on migrant domestic workers and domiciliary care workers demonstrates how immigration policies interact with labour market conditions to produce exploitation.

Employer sponsorship systems create strong dependency relationships. Workers on Skilled Worker or Health and Care Worker visas often cannot change employer without restarting an expensive and complex visa process. Employers may therefore use the threat of withdrawing sponsorship to enforce compliance.

Many workers also incur high recruitment debts, ranging from £6,000 to £24,000, to secure employment in the UK. These debts can trap workers in abusive employment relationships and create conditions resembling debt bondage.

Housing arrangements frequently reinforce this dependency. Many live-in workers experience dual employer–landlord relationships, where eviction may simultaneously mean job loss and visa breach. Some workers are required to pay rent despite service occupancy arrangements, while others are incorrectly charged council tax.

Workers interviewed for the study described extremely long working hours, withheld wages, confiscated passports and restrictions on movement. In the absence of effective labour inspection in private homes, informal support networks — including churches, community groups and WhatsApp networks — often become the primary source of support.

1.5. In the food delivery sector, algorithmic management and immigration enforcement converge to produce extreme precarity

The food delivery sector illustrates how digital labour platforms and immigration enforcement increasingly intersect to shape migrant workers' livelihoods.

Participants in the study included undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, overstayers, EU citizens with pre-settled status and dependants on various visa routes. Despite differences in legal status, they described a shared experience of uncertainty, surveillance and economic coercion.

Platform regulation introduced in 2025 — including biometric identity checks, device restrictions and stricter account verification — has embedded immigration control within the architecture of platform work. Riders frequently described platform algorithms as functioning "like a border guard", determining who can access work and when.

These technological controls have also disrupted informal survival strategies. In the past, account sharing or renting allowed individuals without work authorisation to earn income. New biometric verification systems have largely dismantled these arrangements, pushing many irregularised migrants out of the sector and increasing the cost of rented accounts for those who remain.

The consequences extend beyond the workplace. Riders described working 10–12 hour days in physically demanding conditions while facing constant fear of immigration raids. This combination of immigration enforcement, platform surveillance and economic precarity has produced what stakeholders described as a hyper-visible but highly disposable workforce, disproportionately composed of racialised migrant workers.

2. Methodology

This policy brief draws on research conducted in the UK as part of the I-CLAIM project. The research combines multiple sources of evidence to examine how migrant irregularity is produced and experienced across policy frameworks, public narratives and labour markets.

The analysis integrates four main strands of research.

First, a policy analysis examined legislative and regulatory developments shaping migrant irregularity in the UK between 2005 and 2025, focusing on the interaction between immigration, labour and welfare policies. This analysis was complemented by 11 interviews with key stakeholders, including representatives from trade unions, migrant rights organisations and legal practitioners.

Second, a narrative analysis examined how irregular migration is framed in political, media and civil society discourse. The dataset included 6,816 texts published between 2019 and 2023, including newspaper articles, parliamentary debates, ministerial speeches, party manifestos and third-sector publications.

Third, public attitudes towards irregular migration were analysed using a nationally representative YouGov survey conducted in February 2025 with 1,147 UK adults.

Finally, the research examined the lived experiences of migrant workers in two labour market sectors where irregularised workers are particularly present: food delivery and domestic work. This component draws on 33 in-depth interviews conducted in Birmingham and the West Midlands between January and May 2025, alongside ethnographic observations and informal conversations with workers and community organisations.

Stakeholder engagement was embedded throughout the research through a dedicated UK Stakeholder Group, which met three times between 2023 and 2025 and helped inform the interpretation of findings and the development of policy recommendations.

3. Policy recommendations

Improving the living and working conditions of migrants with precarious or irregular status requires policy responses that address the structural drivers of vulnerability and exploitation, rather than relying primarily on enforcement measures. The evidence presented in this brief shows how immigration policies, labour market structures and public narratives interact to shape migrants' exposure to exploitation. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across national and local levels of governance.

3.1. Introduce safe reporting mechanisms for workers experiencing exploitation

Migrant workers must be able to report labour exploitation, wage theft, unsafe working conditions and abuse without fear that doing so will trigger immigration enforcement.

At present, data-sharing practices between labour market enforcement bodies and immigration authorities discourage many workers with insecure immigration status from seeking help. The UK should establish clearer institutional separation between labour standards enforcement and immigration control, ensuring that workers who report exploitation are not automatically referred to immigration enforcement.

This could include reviewing data-sharing arrangements between the Home Office and the labour enforcement bodies that will operate under, or transition into, the new Fair Work Agency (FWA). Greater protection for whistle-blowers would strengthen labour market enforcement, help identify exploitative employers and support broader efforts to combat labour abuse and modern slavery.

In addition, the government should review data-sharing practices between police forces and immigration enforcement, which may discourage victims or witnesses with insecure status from reporting crimes. Ensuring that victims can safely engage with law enforcement is essential both for public safety and for effective policing.

3.2. Reduce worker dependency created by employer-tied visa systems

Migration routes that tie residence permits to a single employer can create strong dependency relationships that increase workers' vulnerability to exploitation.

Under routes such as the Skilled Worker and Health and Care Worker visas, migrant workers often face significant barriers when attempting to change employers. Workers who have incurred high recruitment debts may feel particularly unable to leave abusive or exploitative employment relationships.

Policy reforms should therefore focus on increasing job mobility for sponsored workers, including simplified procedures for switching employers, clearer protections against retaliatory withdrawal of sponsorship and stronger oversight of recruitment practices.

Greater regulation of international recruitment agencies is also needed to address the problem of recruitment fees and debt-financed migration, which can trap workers in exploitative situations. Strengthening enforcement of existing prohibitions on recruitment fees would help reduce these risks.

Providing clearer pathways to longer-term residence and settlement for migrant workers would also reduce long-term precarity and dependency on individual employers.

3.3. Address administrative pathways into irregular status

Many migrants enter the UK through lawful channels but later fall into irregular status due to administrative barriers, restrictive visa conditions or financial constraints.

High visa fees, the Immigration Health Surcharge and complex renewal procedures can place a significant burden on migrants working in low-wage sectors. Job loss, delays in processing or changes in employment circumstances may lead to loss of status even where individuals initially entered the UK legally.

The government should review the cumulative costs and administrative requirements associated with visa renewal and extension processes, particularly for lower-paid workers. Measures such as greater flexibility in renewal deadlines, clearer guidance for workers changing employers and improved administrative support mechanisms could reduce the risk of avoidable transitions into irregular status.

The impact of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) conditions should also be reviewed. Restrictions on access to basic support during periods of hardship can increase vulnerability to destitution and exploitation, particularly for migrants experiencing job loss, illness or family crisis.

Reducing unnecessary administrative barriers would help prevent avoidable transitions into irregular status and improve overall labour market stability.

3.4. Strengthen labour protections in high-risk sectors

Research highlights persistent risks of exploitation in sectors such as domestic work, domiciliary care and platform-based delivery services, where oversight remains limited and employment relationships are often fragmented.

Strengthening labour standards in these sectors requires increased inspection capacity and regulatory frameworks adapted to the realities of contemporary labour markets. This includes improving oversight of recruitment practices in the care sector, strengthening enforcement of minimum wage regulations and ensuring that labour inspection agencies have the resources necessary to investigate complex employment arrangements.

Greater scrutiny of subcontracting chains is also needed in sectors where responsibility for labour standards becomes dispersed across multiple contractors. Public authorities should ensure that procurement practices do not contribute to exploitative employment structures.

In the platform economy, clearer protections are needed to ensure that workers have transparent procedures for contesting account suspensions or deactivations, and that digital management systems comply with labour standards and due process.

Supporting access to trade union representation and independent advice for migrant workers can also play an important role in preventing exploitation and improving working conditions.

3.5. Promote evidence-based public debate on migration

Public attitudes toward irregular migration are often shaped by incomplete information and highly politicised narratives.

Survey evidence suggests that many people overestimate the scale of irregular migration and underestimate the role of administrative processes, visa overstays and labour market dynamics in producing irregular status. These misconceptions can influence public debate and shape policy priorities.

Government institutions, regulators and civil society organisations should support greater transparency and evidence-based communication on migration, including improved public data on migration pathways, labour market participation and routes into irregular status.

Better information can help foster more informed public debate and support the development of balanced and effective migration policies.

3.6. Strengthen local support and service access

Local authorities play an important role in supporting migrants facing precarious living and working conditions.

Ensuring access to essential services such as healthcare, housing support, language provision and community advice can reduce vulnerability to exploitation and social exclusion. Local authorities should ensure that frontline services are clearly informed about the rights and entitlements of residents with different immigration statuses.

Partnerships with community organisations, migrant support groups and trade unions can help improve outreach to individuals experiencing exploitation or hardship and ensure that local policies are responsive to the needs of diverse communities.

4. References

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