

The logo for I-CLAIM, featuring the text 'I-CLAIM' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The 'I' and 'M' are significantly larger than the other letters. To the left of the text is a yellow square.

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

MARCH 2026

Flexible migration policy and fair working conditions are for the benefit of everyone

Stricter conditions for residence permits produce irregular migration and render people vulnerable to exploitation.

Individuals residing in Finland who are in an atypical and irregularised legal position (such as undocumented migrants) are often described in stigmatising terms. They may be misleadingly characterised as criminals due to their residence status¹, or at least as exploiters of the Finnish social and welfare system and benefits. In most cases, however, the reality of their lives is quite different. When looking at people living in an irregularised situation in Finland and their participation in labour market, it can be said that it is the Finnish labour market that often exploits vulnerable migrants. It is also often forgotten that all workers have rights, regardless of their residence permit status.²

The exploitation of foreign labour is not the result of individual criminal actors, but rather a structural problem. The residence permit system is one structure that increases the risk of work-related exploitation. The narrow definition of employment that qualifies for a residence permit in the Aliens Act does not correspond to the reality of the labour market.

A worker's residence permit is tied to their job and employer, or at least to their work sector (Aliens Act, 71, 72 §). This limits the employee's opportunities to change jobs if the employer does not comply with agreed conditions or the law. The employee's opportunities to find new work after the end of the employment relationship have been made more difficult.

Research methods and data collected in the I-CLAIM project

Analysis of legal and policy documents (N=53)

Qualitative interviews with experts and stakeholders (N=39)

Qualitative interviews with migrants working in the domestic work and cleaning sector and in agriculture (N=60)

Ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and informal interviews

Quantitative text analysis of public narratives on migration, employing corpus linguistics (N=5863)

Representative survey on Finnish attitudes toward irregular migration (N=1025)

¹ Residing without a residence permit is not a crime, but a violation of the Aliens act.

² PICUM (2022). *Guide to Undocumented Workers' Rights at Work under International and EU Law*,

<https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Guide-to-undocumented-workers-rights-EN.pdf>

“I was employed by a Finnish industrial company. I never missed a day of work, I paid my taxes and did everything as I was supposed to. But my passport had expired, and I needed a new one to apply for a residence permit. Migri did not give me an alien's passport, which would have allowed me to apply for my own country's passport at the Swedish embassy. (...) I was fired after more than two years of work because I could not get a work-based residence permit without a passport.”

Eran from Iraq, former asylum seeker and worker, currently undocumented

Foreign workers are therefore not free in the Finnish labour market, which increases the risk of exploitation at work³. Our research revealed that threatening to revoke residence permits is a method used to blackmail and exploit foreign workers. Employers may fail to respond to requests for additional information from the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) as a means of getting rid of an employee when their residence permit is up for renewal.

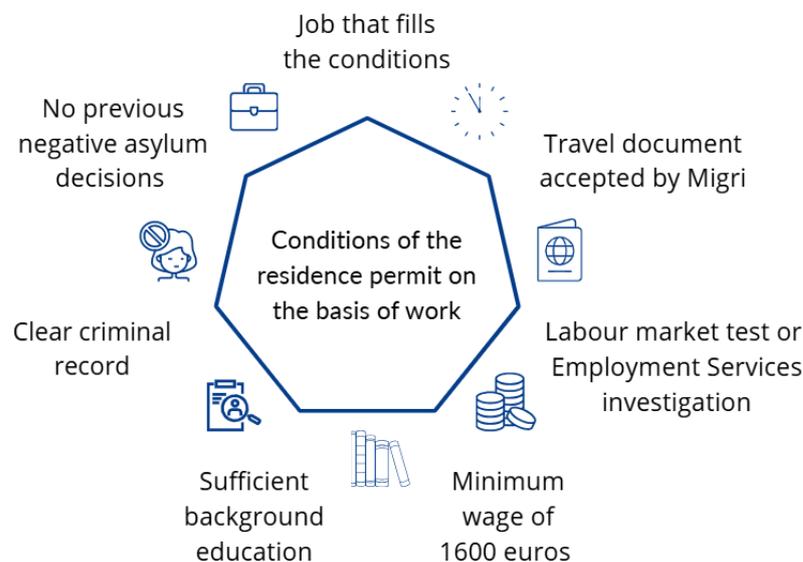
Not all migrants working in Finland have a work-based residence permit: asylum seekers, international students, and family members who have moved to Finland also work.

Often, people living in Finland temporarily or for longer periods without a residence permit also do paid work. Many are unable to obtain a residence permit even if they have a job, because inflexible legislation requires applicants to have a specific type of travel document and that their employment relationship meets certain criteria. In addition, a legislative amendment that came into effect in September 2024 prevents former asylum seekers from obtaining permanent residence on the basis of employment.

Irregularised legal status

By atypical and irregularised legal status, we mean foreigners whose right to reside and work is temporary or precarious, such as asylum seekers, seasonal workers, posted workers, au pairs, Ukrainians within the scope of temporary protection, and other foreigners living on short-term residence permits who are at risk of losing their residence permits and ending up undocumented.

Undocumented persons are persons residing in the country without a right of residence, persons whose residence permit has expired or lapsed, or persons who do not meet the legal requirements for entry into the country.



³ Merikoski, P., Karti, S. and Näre, L. (2024) The legal and policy infrastructure of irregularity: Finland. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/11066291>

It is important to note that people who have migrated to Finland often fill a vital need in the labour market, regardless of their initial reason to migrate. I.e., they work in jobs that are difficult to fill. Their wish is to work in an environment that respects their rights as employees. Improving the legal status of migrants participating in working life prevents gray economy and strengthens workers' rights.

“Other workers, who had been picking strawberries for five years, said they definitely weren't going to stay, no no no way! So they left for another farm, where the farmer paid well and the conditions were much better. But I didn't leave. I didn't dare. It was my first residence permit. I was afraid of breaking the rules.”

Ksenia, a seasonal worker from Russia

A large number of people working in sectors that are essential to Finland's security of supply have uncertain, conditional, or temporary residence status. For example, agricultural food production depends not only on seasonal workers from outside the EU, but also on migrants who have settled in Finland on a more permanent basis. It is often impossible for these workers to avoid poor working conditions, unfair pay, or exploitation, as they are dependent on their employers⁴. Research does not support the claim that simplifying residence permit processes or improving services for undocumented migrants would increase the number of people residing in Finland without legal right of residence.⁵ On the contrary, when the conditions for residence permits are tightened, more and more people already living and working legally in Finland may fall into an irregular legal status and be forced to resort to undeclared work to survive.

⁴ Merikoski, P. & Näre, L. (2025) Precarity and informality in agricultural food production in Finland: the role of migrant workers. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775571>

The current, increasingly tight migration policy is more likely to produce more migrant irregularity and undeclared work than to reduce it.

According to research findings, regardless of the reason for or process of coming to Finland, migrants want to build a secure life for themselves and their families, of which working is an essential part. Categorising individuals according to their migration status does not reflect the reality of their lives, goals, or potential. For example, a person who has received a negative asylum decision may have been in paid employment in Finland for a long time before the decision was made. A person may simultaneously be in need of asylum, an employee, a student, and a family member, regardless of what residence permit they have been granted or whether they have a residence permit at all.

CONTACTS



Lena Näre, Professor

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki

Paula Merikoski, Postdoctoral Researcher

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki

Sari Hammar, Service Area Manager, International Affairs and Migrant Services, Deaconess Foundation

Anne Hammad, Specialist, Undocumented migrants and Migration, Deaconess Foundation

Read more about our research and get in touch!



⁵ Leppäkorpi, M. (2025) "Jotta Suomi ei olisi muita houkuttelevampi" – Vetävät, pitävät ja työntävät tekijät hallituksen esityksissä ulkomaalaislaiksi vuosina 1990–2020. Sosiologia, 62(4). <https://doi.org/10.65374/sosiologia.143891>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for streamlining the residence permit system and preventing migrant irregularity

- 1** Complex residence permit processes should be sped up and simplified by shifting the focus from numerous different requirements to an assessment of the applicant's overall situation.
- 2** The possibility of granting a residence permit on humanitarian grounds should be reinstated so that persons who have been granted asylum but cannot be returned or cannot return do not become undocumented.
- 3** Being undocumented should not be punished: at present, even a brief stay in the country without a residence permit can lead to the rejection of a residence permit application, which has inhumane consequences (rejection of a residence permit on the basis of reprehensible behavior, §36 b).
- 4** The possibility of applying for a work-based residence permit should be restored for persons who have applied for international protection (repeal of the so-called "track-change law").
- 5** Travel document requirements should be loosened (§35) so that the possibility of applying for a work-based residence permit can be realised on an equal basis regardless of the applicant's nationality.
- 6** Those who have been undocumented in the country for a long time should be granted mass regularisation, as is done in Spain. The possibility of a temporary but renewable residence permit granting the holder the right to work would reduce undocumented migration and gray economy. Mass regularisations are also carried out regularly in other EU countries.

Recommendations for preventing work-related exploitation

- 7** The dependence of employees with work-based residence permits on their employers should be reduced so that employees have the opportunity to change employers and sectors of employment. This reduces work-related exploitation and improves working conditions and wages in sectors with a high proportion of migrants.
- 8** In order to prevent the exploitation of foreign labour, ways to intervene in exploitative recruitment practices, such as recruitment fees charged to employees, should be explored. For example, translating the content Migri and Enter Finland websites into several languages (e.g., Thai, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Russian, Somali, Arabic) would help inform workers of their rights before they enter the country and reduce the need to use "migration agents."
- 9** After being exploited in their work, victims should have access to comprehensive safe reporting practices, including the possibility of a long enough and renewable residence permit, even if the contract with the exploiting employer ends.
- 10** The resources allocated to occupational safety and health enforcement (labour inspection) should be increased. The focus of enforcement should be on monitoring the employer's actions, not on monitoring the employee's right to work, so that the risks of reprehensible behavior on the part of the employer do not fall on the employee.
- 11** Work-related exploitation should be more risky for employers than it is now. For instance, criminalising underpayment is a clear step toward securing workers' rights and fairer working conditions. Fair working conditions benefit all workers, whether they were born in Finland or abroad.