

INTERVIEW WITH MICHELE LEVOY, Director of the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)¹

What are PICUM's objectives?

PICUM is a network of 160 organizations working directly with undocumented migrants, mostly in Europe, but also in other countries, such as Morocco. We also conduct advocacy activities towards the European Union and the United Nations. We focus on a range of challenges experienced by undocumented migrants in their daily lives, such as access to health care and justice, fair working conditions and return.

How do undocumented migrants experience access to services?

By mapping laws and practice in European countries, we have found that, in most European Union member States, undocumented migrants have difficulties in accessing health-care services. Even where relevant laws are in place, a major barrier may be the fear that undocumented migrants' personal data may be transmitted to immigration authorities, for example by health-care providers.

What sectors are the most challenging?

Undocumented workers are exposed to different forms of exploitation and may be unable to request assistance from institutions, also due to the lack of firewalls between labour inspectors, immigration enforcement officials and the police. Undocumented migrants have difficulties in accessing justice, as the police are likely to inform immigration authorities if they come to the police to report a crime. Mental health care is a key issue, including for children, who often experience prolonged anxiety and stress due to their or their parents' irregular status, which can follow them in their young adult years and beyond. Other challenges are linked to immigration enforcement policies, such as the conditions of immigration detention (including of children and their families) and return proceedings.

Do you observe differences among undocumented migrants with different characteristics?

Undocumented women experience challenges due to their irregular status, which have so far not yet been adequately recognized in broader gender strategies towards all women. Children face challenges accessing basic services, also due to the impact of their irregular status on their psychosocial development, and due to the violence they may have experienced during deportation or detention.

Do migrants from North and West Africa face specific challenges?

There are very few regular channels for people to migrate and migrants from these regions are often relegated to travelling on unsafe boats across the Mediterranean. They most likely also experience racial discrimination in the workforce, for example by employers who profit from their irregular condition to pay them less than regular workers.

Is PICUM also active in North and West Africa?

In Morocco, we have a member organization working with migrants from sub-Saharan countries and, in recent years, some of our members in Europe have also cooperated with civil society actors in Morocco advocating for regularization policies.

What recommendations do you have for research, programming and policymaking?

We need to improve the evidence base on undocumented migrants in Europe, and North and West Africa. Comprehensive and methodologically sound estimates are still not available. The policy discourse is mainly centred on return policies and prevention of irregular migration, usually with no real consideration for the situation on the ground of people living in irregularity. This has many effects: for example, city-level administrators say that the absence of this evidence hinders the support they can provide to undocumented migrants. We need to put in place firewalls between immigration authorities and services, in order to allow undocumented migrants to report crimes, go to the doctor or register for school without risking deportation. In Europe, we observe a criminalization of people who are helping undocumented migrants, be it through sea rescue or offering shelter, food or any form of humanitarian assistance. Civil society actors stress that humanitarian assistance to undocumented migrants should never be criminalized.

¹ Interview conducted by Irene Schöfberger, IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.