

The impact of irregularity on migrants' access to work in Spain

Spain is a major entry point for migrants into the EU, mostly from Africa and Latin America. In 2024, almost 63,000 migrants arrived by sea from Africa, compared to over 57,000 in 2023.¹ Migrants from Africa often enter irregularly via the Western Mediterranean route (North Africa to southern Spain or Ceuta and Melilla) or, primarily, the Western African route (West Africa to the Canary Islands).² In contrast, Latin American migrants typically enter regularly via plane.³ As of January 2023, Spain had over 6 million legal foreign residents⁴, with Moroccans, Romanians, and Colombians being the most common nationalities. Nationalities along the Western African migration route include Senegalese, Malians, Moroccans, Sudanese, and Ivorians.⁵ In November 2024, Spain announced a new Immigration Regulation.⁶ Among other objectives, the regulation aims to respond to the needs of the domestic labour market through the integration of workers in irregular situations and extending avenues for regular work of migrant workers. In this context, data on working and living conditions of migrants in an irregular situation is limited.

This snapshot provides insights into the experiences of 300 migrants interviewed in Madrid and Barcelona, including 205 in irregular situations and 95 in regular situations (see category definition below). 268 respondents were active on the job market⁷. Comparing experiences of regular and irregular respondents, this snapshot focuses on access to work, sectors of employment, working conditions as well as perceptions of irregular status and informal work.

Data collection for this snapshot has been carried out as part of the [PRIME project](#).

1 UNHCR (n/a) [Operations Data Portal – Mediterranean Situation: Spain](#).

2 European Council (n/a) [Migration flows on the Western routes](#).

3 LaSexta Clave (2023) [El perfil promedio del migrante en España: llega por avión huyendo de guerras, torturas y discriminación](#).

4 Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (2023) [La población de origen inmigrado en España](#).

5 UNHCR (2024) [Spain Profiling of new arrivals \(January - December 2023\)](#).

6 European Commission, [Spain: New immigration reform to enhance migrant integration | European Website on Integration](#). Accessed on January 19th, 2025.

7 "Active on the job market" is a respondent who reported to have been in search of employment at least once upon arrival in Spain. It includes both people employed, and unemployed people in search of employment.

Key findings

- **Barriers to employment were common, especially for migrants in irregular situations.** The majority (87%) of respondents active in the job market faced difficulties finding work. Among those in irregular situations, this percentage was even higher (93%), as the main obstacles were the lack of documentation or work permits.
- **Consequently, paid income was harder to find for those in irregular residency status:** only a minority (41%) of migrants in irregular situations had income from work, far less than the 79% of those with a regular residence status and work authorization.
- **Respondents in irregular situation reported fewer employment options,** with a majority (57 out of 84 respondents, 68%)⁸ working in the only sectors available to them, and engaging primarily in unskilled manual work (66 out of 84 respondents, 78%).
- **70% of wage workers respondents in irregular situations lacked basic work benefits, and 41% were paid through non-standard arrangements,** underlying overall poorer **working conditions for migrants in an irregular situation.**
- **Migrants in an irregular situation felt disproportionately unable to sustain themselves, compared to regular respondents:** 71 out of 85 (83%) irregular respondents considered their income either insufficient (22) or strongly insufficient (49) to meet their needs, compared to 28 out of 62 (45%) regular respondents who considered their income either insufficient (19) or strongly insufficient (19).
- **71% of the respondents in an irregular situation (n=201) consider living without documentation a key obstacle to accessing decent and fairly paid work.**

8 For subsamples smaller than 100, percentage-based results should be interpreted with caution.

Profiles

This snapshot is based on 300 in-person, structured survey interviews conducted with migrants in Madrid and Barcelona between March and July 2024.⁹ The sample included 61% of men and 39% of women, and 75% were aged between 20 and 40 years old. Respondents were purposively sampled among selected nationalities: 39% of the respondents were Moroccan, 35% were Colombian, 22% were Senegalese, and a small proportion (4%) were Honduran. The sampling was stratified by residence status, with 61% of respondents selected among migrants with irregular residency status, and the remaining 39% among migrants with regular residency status.

The snapshot's analysis categorizes respondents based on two factors: **residence status** and **holding of a work permit**¹⁰, resulting in three groups: 1) respondents in irregular situations, lacking both a regular residence status and a work permit (n=205); 2) respondents with regular residence status and a work permit (n=85); 3) respondents with regular residence status but without the right to work.

Due to the small size of the third group (n=10), the analysis focuses on the first two categories.

Aside from holding a valid residency and work authorization, respondents are classified based on their participation in the job market. Among the 300 survey respondents, 268 were part of the active work force (89%). Among the 268 respondents that are part of the active workforce¹¹, 154 were **employed**¹² at the time of the interview (57%). For more detail, see Figure 1.

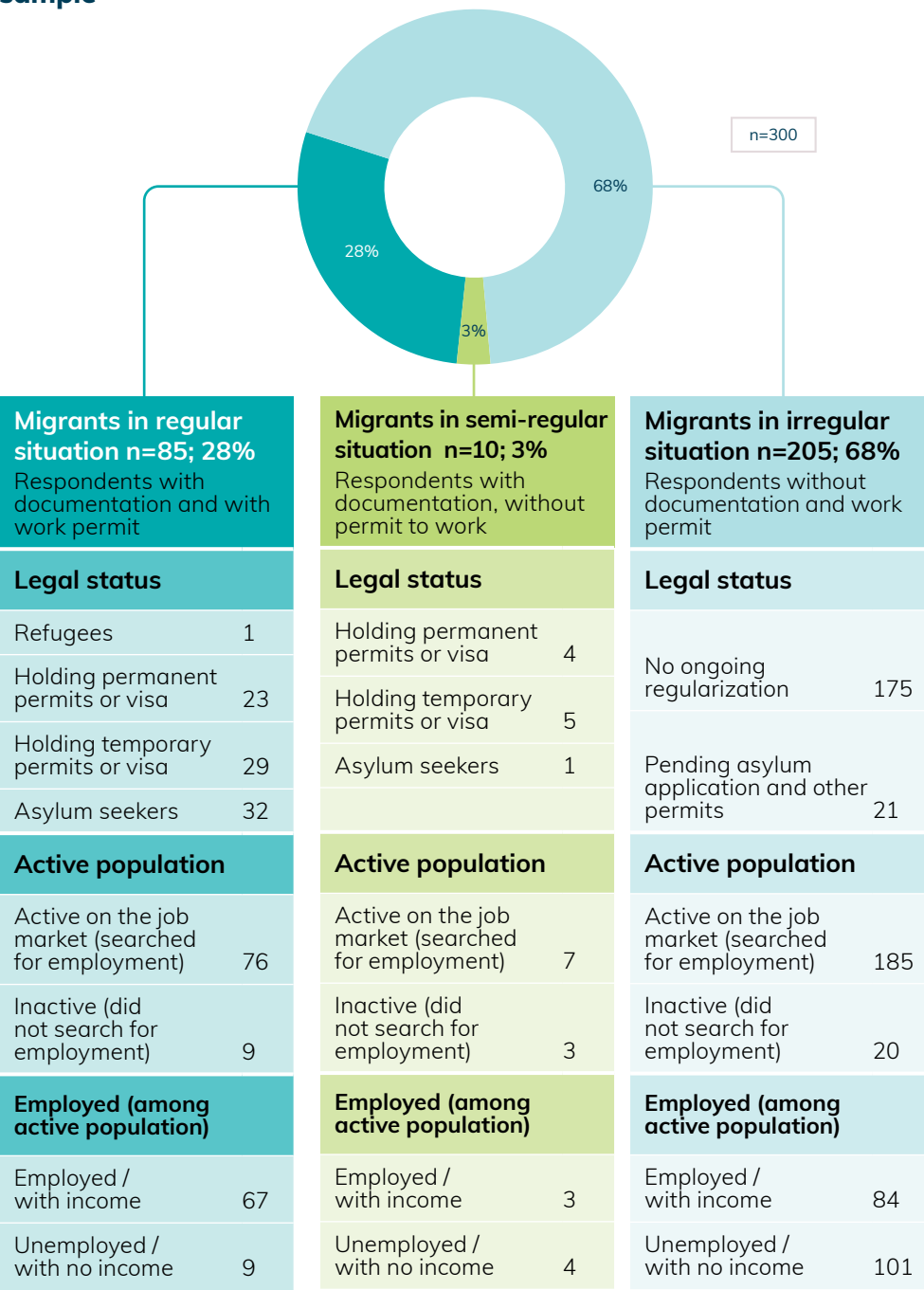
9 The sample is purposive. Data presented in this snapshot cannot be considered as representative of the full population.

10 After submitting an asylum application, and completing the formal interview, asylum seekers in Spain receive a document commonly referred to as the "Red Card" (Tarjeta Roja), which grants asylum seeker the legal right to work in Spain from six months after the interview. In the context of this study, participants self-reported whether they are in possession of a Red card authorizing to work, or other modalities of work authorization.

11 Only respondents who were active in the job market were asked about their employment status and working conditions.

12 The survey considers as "employed" the respondents who reported to have income at the time of data collection. Therefore, this information captured a situation of a specific moment in time, and may not reflect the fluctuations in employment that an individual working in the informal job market may experience.

Figure 1. Breakdown of legal and employment situations of the sample

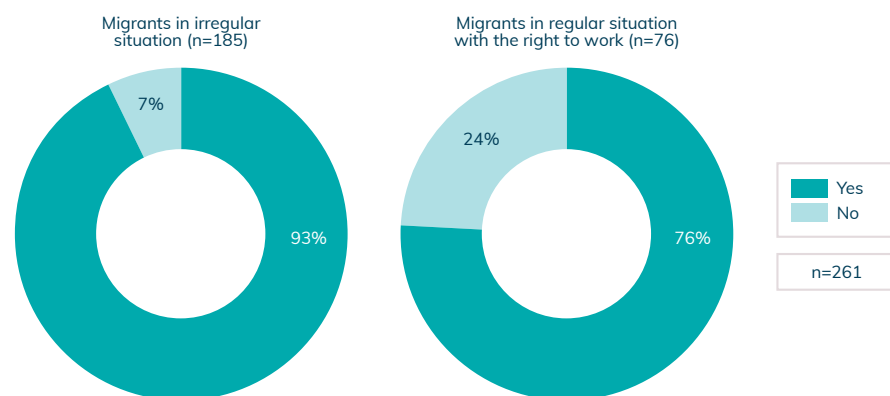


Active workforce: migrants in an irregular situation encountered more barriers to employment

After arriving in the country, most respondents searched employment to support themselves, irrespective of their immigration status or whether they are legally authorized to work. There is little difference between the proportion of migrants in a regular situation (89%) and the proportion of migrants in irregular situations (88%) who reported attempting to find a job after arriving in Spain. **Unsurprisingly, migrants in irregular situations were more likely to face difficulties during their job search compared to their counterparts with residence and work permits, mostly due to their status.**

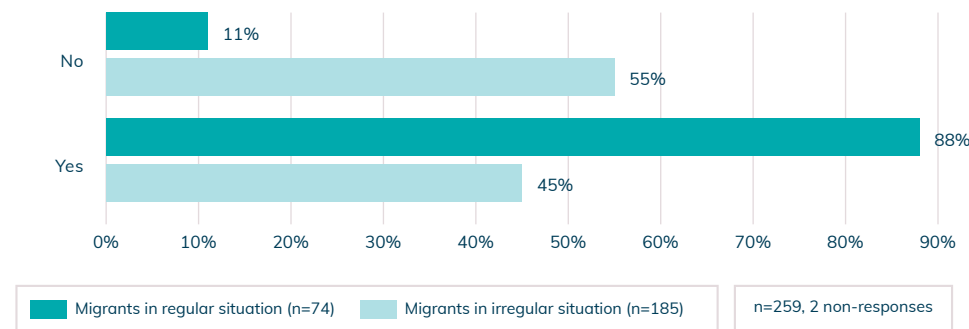
Job search difficulties were more frequent among those in irregular situations, reported by 93% (n=185), in comparison to 57 out of 75 (76%) of regular residents with a work permit (see Figure 2). The **primary obstacle cited was the irregular status itself**, reported by 89%. **Factors other than irregular status represented a challenge for just a minority:** discrimination against migrants was reported by 17%, followed by limited Spanish proficiency (17%), and a lack of knowledge about job search methods and avenues in Spain (10%), **stressing the impact that lack of a regular status and work permit has on securing employment.**

Figure 2. Have you faced any obstacles in looking for a job? (respondents active on the labour market)



Linked to the above, **the proportion of migrants in irregular situations with income from work was lower compared to those in regular situation.** This is the case despite showing similar patterns in job-seeking efforts and reflect the difficulties in looking for a job for this in an irregular situation. While 88% of active migrants in regular situation reported having income from work, 45% of those in irregular situations did so at the time of data collection (84 out of 185), as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Do you currently have an income from work? (active respondents)



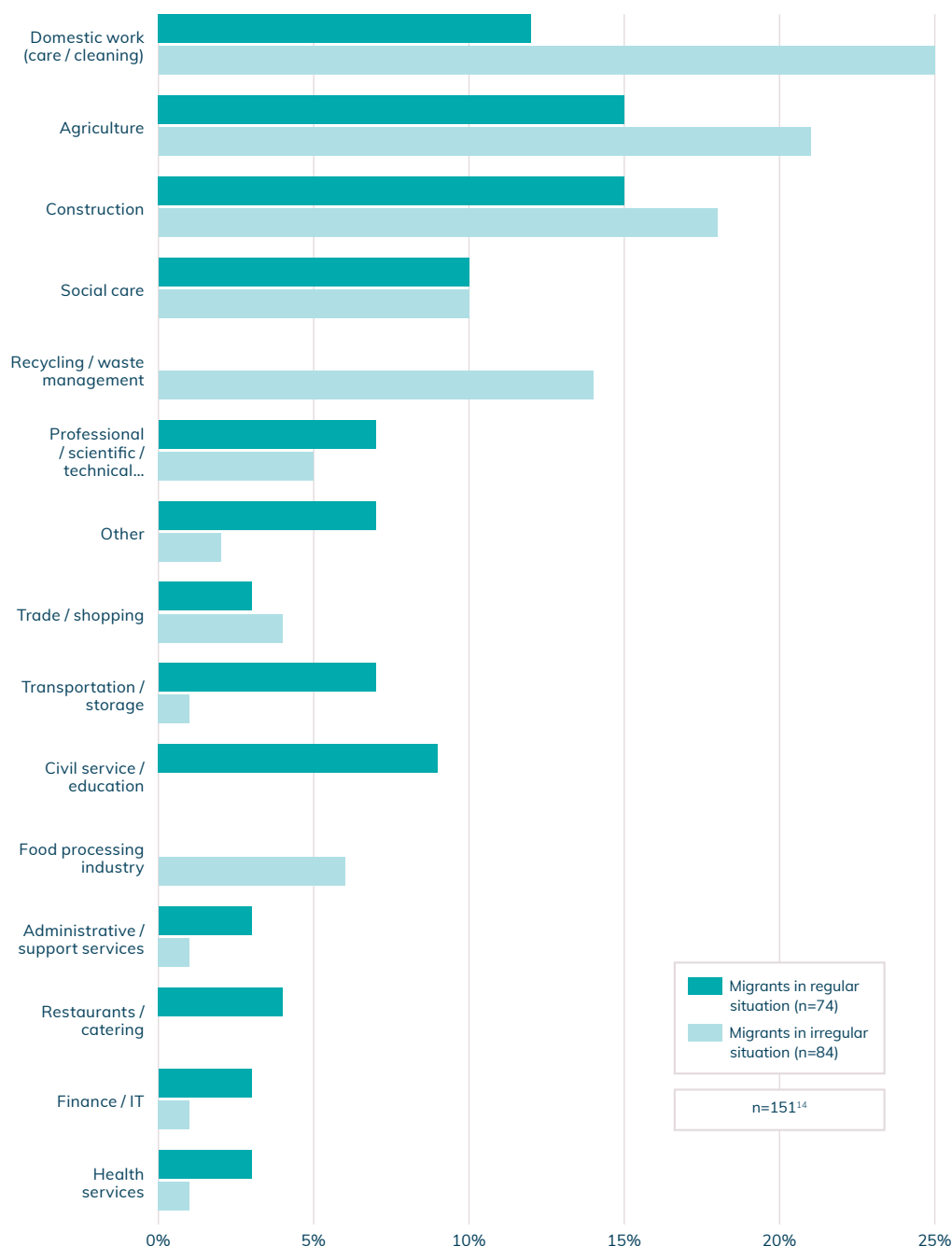
Employed respondents: Unskilled labour is the most commonly reported type of work, particularly prevalent among migrants in irregular situations

For respondents who were employed (n=151), the main sectors of work included domestic work, trade/retail, restaurants/catering, and construction but **employment sectors differed remarkably based on the respondents' status** (see Figure 4).

Migrants in irregular situations predominantly worked in trade, domestic work, construction, and waste management / waste picking, which consists of garbage scavenging and collecting tin and metals from discarded waste to resale it to recycling stations. Due to the health risks and stigma connected to this activity, waste management/recycling, reported exclusively by migrants in irregular situations, can sometimes be viewed as a survival strategy rather than a form of employment.¹³

13 ILO, (2019). [Waste pickers' cooperatives and social and solidarity economy organizations](#). Cooperatives and the World of Work series, n. 12; see also WIEGO, (2013). [Waste pickers: the right to be recognized as workers](#)

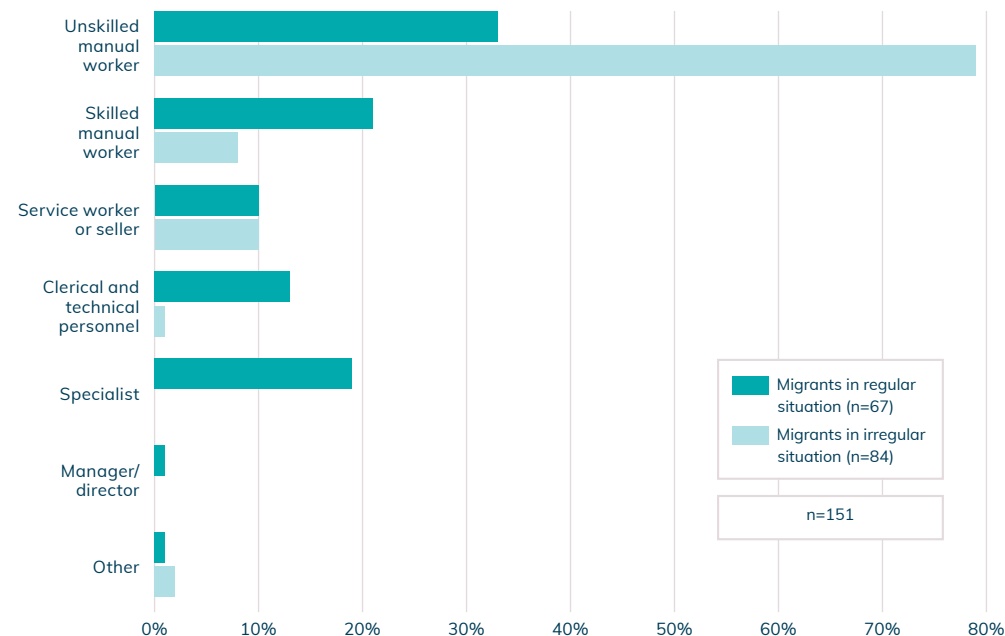
Figure 4. In what sector is your main job in Spain?



14 Due to the small sample size of the two groups, the absolute numbers are very low when broken down by singular answer options.

More than three quarters of active respondents in an irregular situation (66 out of 84) reported carrying out unskilled manual work in their occupation. In contrast, migrants with legal residency status and work permit were spread across a broader range of occupations, including highly skilled (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. What type of occupation¹⁵ do you have, in your sector of employment (n=151).



Men and women tended to work in different sectors. Women were mostly reporting work in domestic work and restaurants, while men mainly reported working in construction, recycling, and agriculture. The occupations of migrant women surveyed were more concentrated in specific sectors. In particular, a third of the women active on the job market, reported being employed in domestic work (21 out of 60). In contrast, the job sectors reported by men were more varied, yet men were also employed in a few sectors exclusively such as construction and recycling.

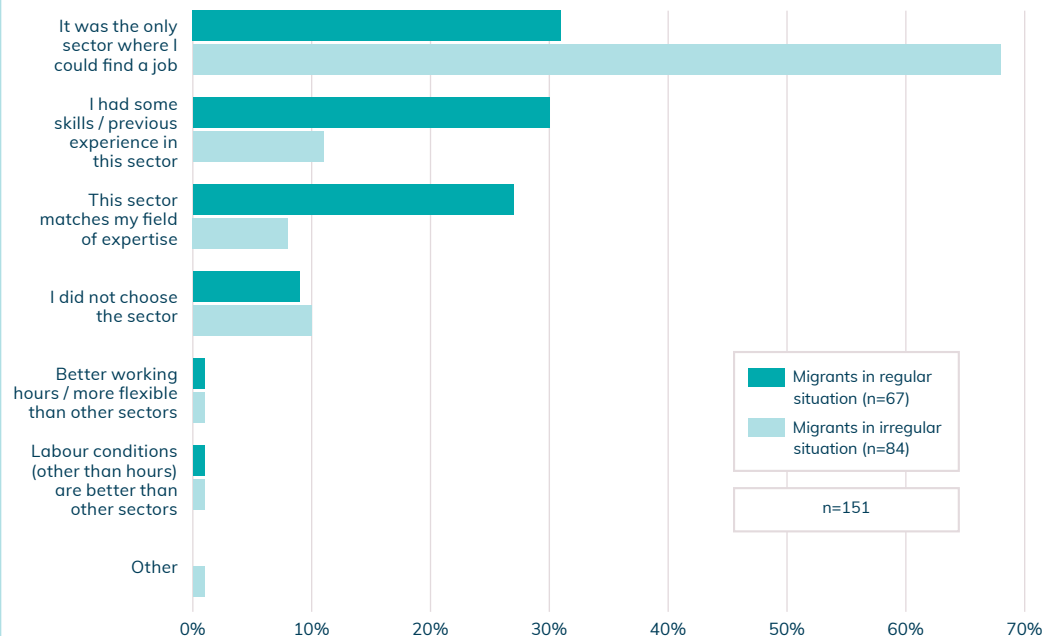
15 Examples of unskilled manual work: hotel maid, fruit picker, waiter, cleaner. Examples of skilled manual work: plumber, welder, nurse, cook, qualified bricklayer. Examples of service or sales work: hairdresser, shoemaker, tailor. Examples of specialist work: lawyer, medical doctor, accountant, IT specialist, teacher. Examples of clerical and technical work: secretary, office assistant, electrical technician. See also: [International Standard Classification of Occupations \(ISCO\) - ILOSTAT](#)

Over half of migrants in an irregular situation reported working in the only sector available to them

More than half of migrants in irregular situations surveyed reported that they did not choose their work sector; instead, they were employed in the only sector where they could find a job. Their legal status significantly restricted the sectors available to them: 57 out of 84 (68%) of employed migrants in an irregular situation reported working in the only sector they could find a job in, compared to 21 out of 67 (31%) migrants with a residence and work permit. Additionally, 20 out of 67 (30%) regular respondents reportedly choose a job matching their previous experiences, compared to 9 out of 84 respondents in an irregular situation, as shown in Figure 6. Additionally, for regular respondents, 18 out of 67 (27%) were doing a job matching their field of expertise, which was the case for only 7 (8%) out of 84 respondents in an irregular situation. This data highlights the under-utilisation of irregular workers' skills and expertise, and – from the perspective of Spain's economic and labour market needs - not capitalising on the human capital migrants bring.

Only two respondents (one in an irregular situation and the other one with residence status and work permit) said they chose their employment sector based on working or labour conditions. This finding suggests a de-prioritization of factors like working hours or decent pay in favour of maximizing their chances of being hired.

Figure 6. Why did you choose this sector of employment?



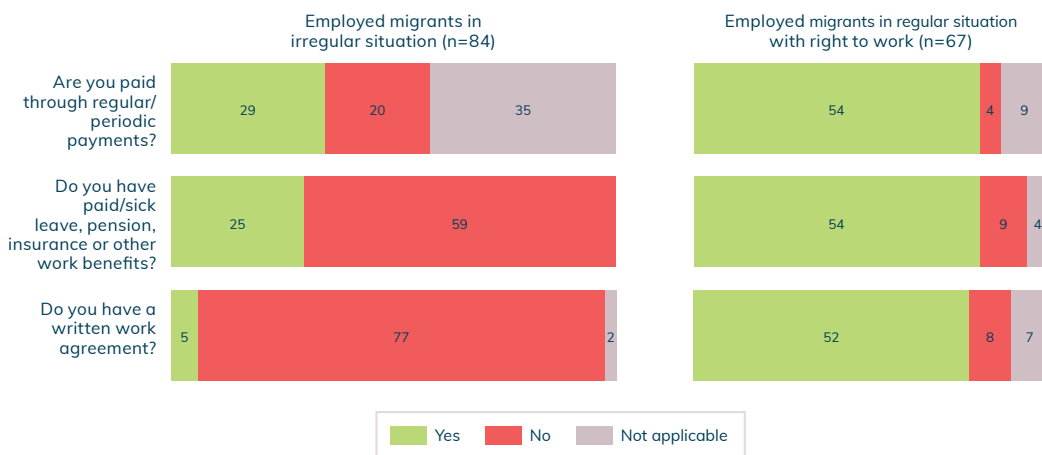
Migrants in irregular situations consistently experience poorer working conditions

Migrants in irregular situations consistently reported experiencing poorer working conditions across all aspects, compared to those in regular situations. 70% of migrant workers in irregular situations reported not receiving basic benefits typically included in work contracts or arrangements, such as medical insurance coverage, paid sick leave, pension contributions, occupational safety measures (such as protective equipment).

Additionally, 20 out of 49 migrants in irregular situations and working in paid positions were compensated through alternatives to wages, such as piecework, work-for-food arrangements, unpaid labour, or accommodation in exchange for their work. Nearly all respondents (77 out of 82) who held an irregular status reported working without a written agreement, even informal, with their employers (see Figure 7).¹⁶

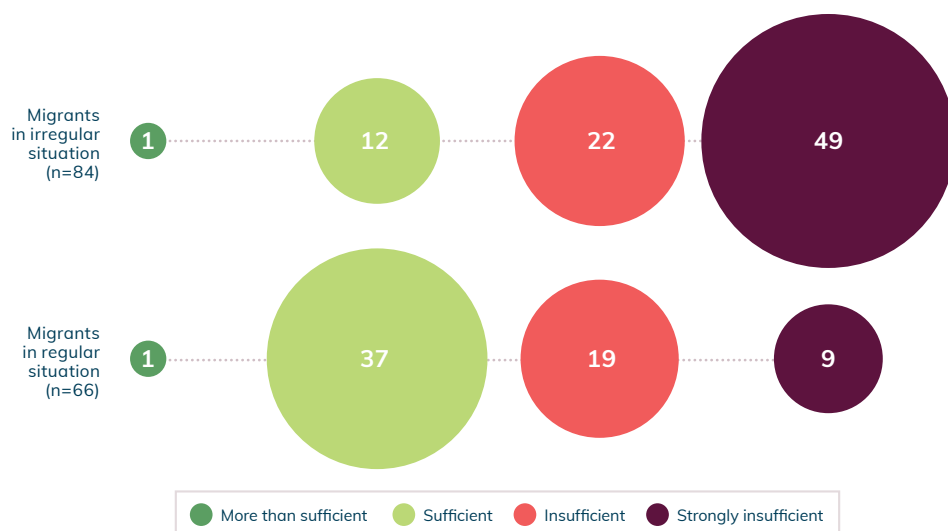
¹⁶ In Figure 7, self-employed respondents (such as waste pickers and daily workers in agriculture and construction) are shown as N/A

Figure 7. Working conditions



Migrants in an irregular situation feeling disproportionately unable to sustain themselves

Figure 8. To what extent is your income sufficient to cover your needs, and the needs in your household? (n=150¹⁷)



¹⁷ One respondent in regular situation refused to answer and was excluded from this figure.

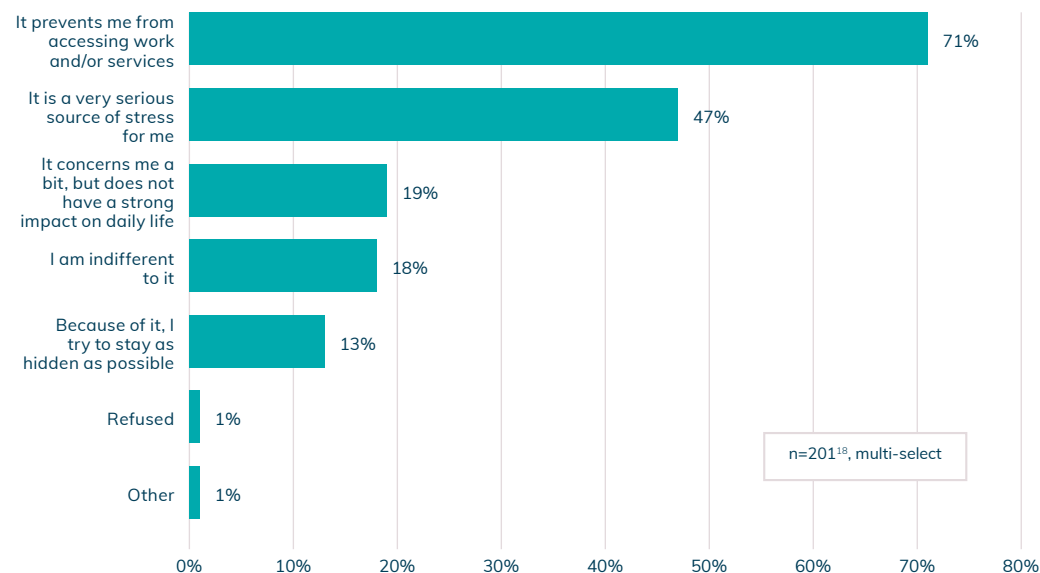
While 28 out of 67 (42%) of migrants surveyed who held a legal residency status and work permit considered their income either insufficient (n=19) or strongly insufficient (n=9), this proportion goes up to 71 out of 85 (83%) for irregular respondents, with 49 out of 84 (58%) considering it strongly insufficient (see Figure 8). This disparity may be linked not only to actual salary differences but also to varying expectations regarding income levels.

Irregularity is a concern, but doesn't critically impact daily life

For 71% of the respondents in irregular situations (n=201), living without documentation prevents them from accessing fairly paid, decent work or other opportunities, impacting their well-being. Nearly half (47%) reported that their irregular status is a significant source of stress. For a minority, irregular status is concerning but not critically impacting their daily lives (19%) and 18% is indifferent to it.

Finally, a minority (13%) is obliged to stay as hidden as possible, therefore leading to marginalization (see Figure 9). This is consistent with the fact that most migrants in irregular situations interviewed (71%) stated that they intend to regularize their situation at some point or have already taken steps in that direction (25%).

Figure 9. How do you feel about your irregular status?



¹⁸ Four non-responses were excluded from this figure.

Protection of Irregular Migrants In Europe (PRIME)

As consortium members of the [Protection of Irregular Migrants in Europe \(PRIME\) project](#), the Mixed Migration Centre Europe (MMC), the University of Warsaw, and the University of Zagreb are collecting longitudinal, quantitative data in Croatia, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain.

The objective of the project is to understand recently-arrived migrants' access to essential services and rights, participation in the informal labour market, and how their conditions, experiences, and strategies evolve over time.



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