

Everyday Borders

Documentation for migrants & refugees

What's the problem?

Many migrants and refugees experience everyday problems due to lack of documentation needed to lead a normal life in the UK. The main challenge for many is to open a bank account- most banks do *not* accept the Home Office identity cards issued to refugees and/or asylum seekers. There is not enough research on the experience of EU migrants, but with changes related to Brexit this is likely to become an issue. Inability to open bank accounts makes life difficult for those seeking work and/or claiming benefits.

In addition to refugees and migrants who here legally and could be classified as '**under-documented**', migrants with no status are classified as '**undocumented**'. They are often exploited by unscrupulous employers who pay them in cash and less than a minimum wage. The estimated undocumented population is between 400,000 and 650,000 people in the UK, mostly in London. Under-documentation presents a challenge in accessing many other entitlements, e.g. free school meals are no longer available in some schools for children whose parents do not have National Insurance Number.

The root causes

The root causes of this issues are to be found in an increase of so called internal immigration controls – a set of policies developed over the last six years with the intention to make life more difficult for migrants and refugees in the UK. These policies include immigration checks in higher education, NHS and by private landlords. They also limit access to drivers licenses which can be used as a form of ID.

Why should we care?

The restrictive policies affect all migrants and refugees as they create a climate of suspicion and fear of immigrants regardless of their status. Refugees and migrants with legal status are all treated with a broad brush of prejudice and have to prove their entitlements on the daily basis. This affects their integration and prevents them from living their lives with dignity.

Who is working on this issue already?

There were sporadic local campaigns to speed up the process of issuing of National Insurance numbers (NiNos) for those entitled to have them, but the overall issue of documentation has not been addressed at all in the UK by any of the advocacy or campaigning organisations. Migrants Organise has raised the issue of underdocumentation in pre-election campaign for the Mayor of London, supported by the Trust for London, summarized in this short video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KR-hp66J7aE>

There is a successful example of municipal ID cards scheme in operation in New York, followed by many cities in the US as well as Paris. The ID cards issued by the Mayor's office are voluntary and developed in cooperation with the police and banks and are open to all residents to avoid stigmatization of migrants and refugees.

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Although the ID cards are in direct breach of Federal law in the US, many cities, including the police departments welcome them as a way to better police and protect local immigrant populations, reduce exploitation and promote better community cohesion and sense of belonging. More information about the US ID card scheme can be found here

<https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/municipal%20id%20report.pdf>

What Can Be Done?

Migrants Organise has identified the issue and is raising awareness, but the real change can only come from an organised movement of people affected by the issue.

The new Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has appointed Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement. Matthew Ryder QC who will join the Mayor's team at City Hall from the beginning of October 2016. <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-appoints-deputy-mayor-for-social-integration>

Around 38% of London residents are migrants and refugees and they deserve to feel welcome in the city they live in and contribute to.

Are you interested in taking action? What next?

- 1. Find out more:** Have members of your community had problems like this? It could impact access to health care; getting children into school; renting houses; extending drivers licences or opening bank accounts? What happened? What was the impact/consequence? How did it make them feel? What did they do? How much information did they have about paperwork required and where did they go for advice and help?
- 2. Who could speak out in this?:** Have you asked the community, spoken to civic leaders, done some research, gathered stories? Would anyone be willing to speak of their experience?
- 3. Create an action:** Think of solutions- What would be helpful to people? How could things be different for others in the same situation? Who could make the change you want on this issue? Who is your target? What creative action would get a reaction from them to get you to meet them?
- 4. Can you name the problem?** Is there a snappy name that encapsulates these ideas, but is positive and proactive?