




GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION

Youth Policy Brief - UNECE 



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Key Recommendations

- While initiatives exist to support young migrants in education (language programs, teacher training), significant **disparities persist**, highlighting the **need for a more comprehensive approach** to ensure **equal and equitable access and success** in education systems.
- Young migrants urge **recognition of foreign qualifications** through streamlined processes like the European qualifications passport. They highlight the value of youth-led initiatives offering skills training and language support for migrants. Calling for **broader investment** in these projects, they emphasize the need for **collaboration with the private sector** to create productive jobs and combat exploitation.
- Young migrants in Europe and North America fall prey to trafficking at **alarming rates** due to a web of vulnerabilities: displacement, precarious legal status, and isolation. Only through concerted cooperation by governments, NGOs, and international organizations can these exploitation rings be dismantled and ensure **safe journeys** for these young migrants.
- Although regular migration pathways (work, education, family reunification) offer a promising alternative to irregular migration, the limited scope, complex application processes, delays in processing, and lack of harmonization create hurdles. These shortcomings risk undermining countries' ability to benefit thoroughly from the skills and potential of young migrants and increase the risks of people resorting to smugglers/traffickers. Therefore, there is a clear need to **expand safe and legal migration routes** to save lives.
- **End the practice of child immigration detention.**

Youth Consultations - Overview

The Migration Youth and Children Platform (MYCP) is the platform by youth, and for youth to impact the highest levels of international migration policy. MYCP is the United Nations Major Group for Children & Youth Migration Constituency. Together, MYCP aims to advance the engagement and meaningful participation of children and youth in policy spaces related to migration at the global, regional, and national levels.

In anticipation of the GCM Regional Reviews in 2023-24, MYCP spearheaded consultations with youth-led and youth-focused organizations, along with young migrants, across Europe and North America. Guided by MYCP's regional teams in Europe and North America, these consultations delved into the experiences and effects on youth pertaining to GCM objectives. Specifically targeting Objectives 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 21—previously identified as pivotal for young individuals in the region—the consultations sought to gather insights and perspectives from stakeholders. This policy brief is created with inputs from our constituency members and partners, reflecting the collective voice of youth from North America and Europe.

In 2023, 286,838 persons arrived in Europe, while at least 3,997 are missing or dead¹ and 2,475,669 enforcement encounters occurred at the United States Southwest Land Border alone² breaking the record set in 2022. 2,968,817 migrants have crossed the borders of the Mediterranean, the African region, Latin America, and Asia to reach North America and Europe. The global community must confront the stark reality of its failure to address the plight of migrants worldwide, evident in the Mediterranean Sea's transformation into a **graveyard**.

Eurostat reported that in 2022, young individuals aged 15 to 29 who were non-EU citizens and residing in the EU accounted for 10.7% of the population within that age bracket. This demographic equated to roughly 13.2 million young non-EU citizens residing in the EU during the same year.³ Young migrants bring a wealth of potential to Europe. They often arrive with skills and knowledge gained in their home countries, filling critical labor shortages in various sectors. From healthcare and engineering to technology and entrepreneurship, their diverse skill sets can inject dynamism into European economies. Additionally, young migrants contribute to cultural vibrancy, fostering a more inclusive and cosmopolitan society. Their experiences and perspectives enrich local communities, promoting intercultural understanding and breaking stereotypes. In addition, young migrants represent a future generation with a vested interest in Europe's success.

Youth Priorities

1. Access to Education

In Europe and North America, young migrants face numerous challenges in accessing education. Language barriers hinder comprehension and participation, leading to isolation and frustration. Discrimination from peers, educators, and the community fosters a hostile environment, impeding inclusion.

Lack of prior qualification recognition forces many young migrants to repeat schooling, wasting time and discouraging some. Moreover, socioeconomic factors further disadvantage these students. Limited access to essential resources like textbooks, technology, and tutoring creates an uneven playing field compared to their native-born peers. The financial burden of school supplies, transportation, and potential after-school work to support their families can be a significant barrier to educational attainment, resulting in a perpetuated disadvantage.

2. Trafficking of persons

¹ <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>

² <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics

Young migrants, vulnerable due to displacement, lack of legal status, and limited support networks are at high risk of falling prey to trafficking networks. Their isolation resulting from legal status issues makes them easy targets for traffickers exploiting their fear of deportation. Without established support networks, they are susceptible to further exploitation by traffickers offering false promises. Language and cultural barriers, as well as a lack of firewalls between service provision and immigration enforcement authorities, hinder access to assistance and understanding rights, but also in migrants avoiding them. Discrimination exacerbates the situation, limiting access to support and lawful employment and heightening susceptibility to trafficking.

These young individuals face exploitation in various forms: forced labor in industries like agriculture or domestic work, sexual exploitation, and even organ removal. Certain groups, such as young women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and religious minorities, are particularly at risk due to intersecting vulnerabilities.

The urgency of this issue is reflected in recent reports. The Council of Europe, recognizing the increased risks associated with the migration context, called for stronger prevention measures in October 2023.⁴ Similarly, the European Parliament highlighted the need to combat migrant smuggling, acknowledging its potential link to trafficking.⁵

Even though the exact numbers for 2023 remain unavailable, the existing reports and resources paint a concerning picture. Data gaps cannot mask the alarming exploitation of young migrants in Europe. Existing reports reveal a critical issue demanding a multi-stakeholder response. Governments must act on two fronts. Expanding and simplifying safe and legal pathways (work permits, education opportunities) reduces the pool of vulnerable youth susceptible to traffickers. Secondly, robust law enforcement is needed, but it must prioritize victim protection. This means ensuring trafficked young people are not criminalized for their exploitation. NGOs and international organizations can support these efforts by providing vital services and advocating for young migrants' rights. Collaborative action is critical to creating a safer environment where their journeys hold opportunity, not exploitation.

3. Regular pathways

For young people seeking to build a future, navigating migration's legal and practical aspects can be daunting. Regular migration statistics in Europe paint a complex picture, but some key trends emerge. Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, provides valuable data. According to their latest figures⁶, over 2.3 million immigrants entered the EU from non-EU countries in 2021. Although a

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<https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/-/european-anti-trafficking-day-council-of-europe-expert-group-calls-for-preventing-human-trafficking-risks-exacerbated-in-the-context-of-migration>

⁵ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757577/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)757577_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757577/EPRS_BRI(2023)757577_EN.pdf)

⁶ https://immigration-portal.ec.europa.eu/index_en

breakdown by age isn't readily available, this indicates a notable increase in arrivals. Additionally, the number of residence permits issued in the EU during the same year surpassed 2.9 million⁷.

As irregular migration concerns persist, the region is embracing regular pathways to facilitate safe and legal opportunities for young individuals. These pathways, catering to diverse needs and aspirations, offer a promising alternative to embarking on a dangerous journey for those seeking to contribute their skills and talents to destination countries and to reunite with family members. Statistically, family reunification is the most significant regular pathway; in 2022, family reunification accounted for 34.9 % of valid residence permits held by non-EU citizens in the EU.⁸

One critical pathway is labor migration, which focuses on attracting young professionals with expertise aligned with the evolving demands of the labor markets. By offering work permits and visas linked to specific job openings, countries aim to address critical labor shortages in various sectors. This approach not only benefits young migrants seeking opportunities but also fosters economic growth. Another pathway, education and research, opens doors for international students to pursue higher education in esteemed institutions. This fosters knowledge exchange and intercultural dialogue, enriching educational experiences and building bridges across cultures. Beyond education and work, family reunification plays a crucial role by allowing established migrants to sponsor family members, fostering social cohesion and integration.

4. Alternatives to detention

The detention of young migrants in Europe and North America, a practice that contradicts fundamental human rights, continues to cast a shadow on the efforts towards a humane and just migration system. Despite international legal frameworks, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, guaranteeing the right to liberty and security of person, the reality for many young migrants seeking refuge or a better life falls far short of these ideals. Moreover, the UN Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on the Rights of Migrant Workers has stated that "Every child, at all times, has a fundamental right to liberty and freedom from immigration detention."

⁹Despite the lack of comprehensive and readily available data on the prevalence of detention across Europe, the European Migration Network reports that in 2021, 9 out of the 27 EU member states still resorted to detaining asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors¹⁰. In 2022, immigration authorities encountered more than 152,000 unaccompanied minors at or near the US-Mexico border, and approximately 72 percent of all unaccompanied minors in federal care were 15 years old or older.

⁷ https://immigration-portal.ec.europa.eu/index_en

⁸ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Residence_permits_-_statistics_on_stock_of_valid_permits_at_the_end_of_the_year#:~:text=At%20the%20end%20of%202022%2C%20family%20reunification%20accounted%20for%2034.9,EU%20citizens%20in%20the%20EU.&text=Moroccan%20\(2.0%20million\)%2C%20Turkish,at%20the%20end%20of%202022](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Residence_permits_-_statistics_on_stock_of_valid_permits_at_the_end_of_the_year#:~:text=At%20the%20end%20of%202022%2C%20family%20reunification%20accounted%20for%2034.9,EU%20citizens%20in%20the%20EU.&text=Moroccan%20(2.0%20million)%2C%20Turkish,at%20the%20end%20of%202022)

⁹ <https://www.refworld.org/reference/research/cmw/2017/en/119190>

¹⁰ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/EMN_Study_on_detention_0.pdf

However, authorities in the United States have also detained infants and toddlers.¹¹ It is crucial to emphasize that concerns regarding immigration detention extend beyond unaccompanied minors to include children accompanied by their families.

Fortunately, a growing body of research and best practices highlights the effectiveness of rights-respecting alternatives to immigration detention for children and families. These alternatives move beyond traditional institutional settings and encompass diverse options that prioritize liberty and well-being. Examples include providing rental assistance to families, coupled with case management services, to facilitate their integration into communities. This approach not only upholds human dignity but also demonstrably reduces the significant costs associated with operating detention centers.

For a deeper exploration of these alternatives, we recommend consulting resources from the [International Detention Coalition](#), the [UN Refugee Agency](#), and the [UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children](#). Their insights can contribute to the development of a more humane and effective migration system.

5. Labor exploitation

The promise of a brighter future beckons many young migrants, yet the harsh reality can be far from the idyllic dream. Although initiatives promoting safe and legal migration pathways are gaining traction, a significant number of young migrants still fall prey to labor exploitation.

Data collection on the specific number of young migrants facing labor exploitation remains a challenge. The clandestine nature of the crime and the fear of deportation amongst victims make it challenging to quantify the issue.

The ILO's 2022 report, "Global Estimates of Modern Slavery," estimates that 16 million people are in forced labor globally, with a significant portion being young migrants.¹² While the report doesn't provide a regional breakdown, Europe and North America are not immune to this issue. A 2023 European Parliament resolution on the exploitation of young migrants highlights the particular vulnerability of young people due to factors like limited language skills, lack of knowledge about their rights, and desperation for work.¹³

Highly skilled migrants are critical to Canada's social and economic vitality. However, they struggle to secure employment aligned with their qualifications despite having similar or superior skills and credentials due to the absence of inclusive post-immigration professional integration policies and support.

¹¹ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-detention-child-migrants#chapter-title-0-2>

¹² https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS_854733/lang--en/index.htm

¹³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=COM:2022:740:FIN>

Thus, they typically earn less and often live below the low-income threshold compared to those born in the country.¹⁴

Young migrants are especially vulnerable to exploitation in sectors such as agriculture (long hours, low pay, debt bondage)¹⁵, domestic work (excessive hours, limited freedom, potential abuse), construction (dangerous conditions, withheld wages), and fast food/hospitality (long hours, low wages, unfair treatment). They also face heightened vulnerability to exploitation as a result of various factors. Their uncertain legal status often forces them into silence out of fear of deportation. Limited language proficiency impedes their ability to comprehend their rights and access assistance. Moreover, a lack of knowledge about labor safeguards renders them easy prey for exploitation.

In North America, some temporary foreign worker programs are seen as breeding grounds for contemporary forms of slavery, emphasizing the need for enhanced worker protection measures.¹⁶ A significant concern affecting migrant workers is employer-specific work permits, which tether them to a single employer, granting them control over their employment, compensation, working conditions, and immigration status.¹⁷ Temporary foreign worker programs have been criticized for low pay, inflexibility, and poor management. It is estimated that approximately 40 percent of farmworkers in the US were undocumented in recent years¹⁸ rendering them particularly vulnerable due to their precarious legal status.

Combating exploitation requires a multi-pronged attack. Stronger laws protecting all workers, regardless of immigration status, need teeth to punish abusers. Educating young migrants about their rights and resources through multilingual campaigns is key. Empowering them further with language training and legal aid access is vital. Finally, collaboration between authorities and migrant rights groups is crucial to dismantle the system of exploitation.

European youth organizations are tackling youth unemployment head-on with innovative projects. These projects focus on equipping young migrants with the skills they need to succeed, including technical training, digital literacy, and language courses. Recognizing the importance of mental well-being, they offer mental health support and safe spaces for young migrants to integrate comfortably. Additionally, these projects raise awareness about safe migration and future job prospects and even facilitate

¹⁴ <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/13/3/75>

¹⁵

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/nov/14/migrant-workers-face-exploitation-as-result-of-post-brexit-scheme-says-report>

¹⁶

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/canada-anchor-fight-against-contemporary-forms-slavery-human-rights-un>

¹⁷

<https://canadianlabour.ca/canadas-unions-migrant-workers-in-canada-deserve-equal-rights-protections/#:~:text=A%20significant%20issue%20impacting%20migrant.status%20of%20the%20migrant%20worker>

¹⁸ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-temporary-foreign-worker-visa-programs>

internships with documentation recognizing acquired skills, ultimately boosting employability for young migrants.

Annex - MYCP's Intervention at the UNECE Regional Review

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I speak to you today as a migrant and on behalf of the Migration Youth and Children Platform (MYCP), the platform by youth and for youth to impact the highest levels of international migration policy. Our platform adds our voices to this crucial discussion, recognizing the profound impact of migration on our interconnected world.

Today, I stand before you as a young person and one of the millions of young migrants and children whose dreams and aspirations shape the future of our world. As young migrants, it is **crucial** that we are included in national action plans, strategies, and policy spaces to ensure a whole-of-society approach to migration governance. While migration is a positive and empowering experience for many of us, it is increasingly clear that a lack of human rights-based migration governance at the global and national levels is leading to the routine violation of migrants' rights in transit, at international borders, and in the countries they migrate to.

Imagine, if you will, the **countless obstacles** they face in their pursuit of a brighter tomorrow. Picture the language barriers that render them voiceless, the lack of documentation that threatens their very existence, and the discrimination that casts shadows upon their hopes. These are not just barriers; they are formidable walls that stand between them and their dreams.

At MYCP, our Europe and North America teams have identified key priorities that are crucial for shaping migration policies across the region in consultation with grassroots youth, and I am here to raise our collective voice and to call for action on the issues that affect us everyday.

First and foremost, **access to education** stands as a fundamental pillar in the journey of young migrants. Education equips young migrants with vital skills and knowledge, fostering both their integration into society and their contribution to it, yet they face significant barriers such as language, discrimination, and socioeconomic disparities. It is imperative that migration policies prioritize removing these barriers and ensuring equal opportunities for all young migrants to thrive.

Secondly, the issue of **trafficking of persons** cannot be overlooked. Young migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by traffickers who prey on their desperation and lack of support networks. We not only need to strengthen measures and legislation but actively work with communities to prevent young migrants, especially women and girls, from being subjected to one of the most inhumane practices. Survivors of trafficking are then faced with exploitative labor practices and working conditions that threaten their lives every day. Enforcement of humane and respectful labor regulations is critical to ensuring young migrants feel safe at work.

We've all seen the images of migrants and refugees drowning in boats in the Mediterranean or the English Channel. Or stuck in the Rio Grande, struggling to reach safety in North America. The **lack of**

safe and legal routes across Europe and North America force young migrants to take dangerous journeys, risking their lives. This can stop, but it takes effort and international cooperation. Tackling route-based migration challenges whilst establishing safe and legal pathways for migrants can save lives, create hope, and enrich societies. **We need migrants, so we must do better.**

But what happens when migrants find safety? They find themselves put behind bars and treated like criminals simply for being who they are. For children and young people, this has an inordinate effect on our mental health and diminishes our humanity. The young people of Europe and North America have been clear about one thing. No child should be put in a cage or separated from their family, having been forcibly displaced from their home or in search of a better life. **You must end this practice now.** And work together to find community-based **alternatives to immigration detention** - putting humanity back into migration.

Our region is getting older. We're looking at the past on how to inform the present. But young people are already taking the lead to reinvigorate migration across the region. Far too often, young migrants' dreams are met with closed doors and indifferent gazes, leaving our communities deprived of their valuable contributions and perspectives. They are denied the fundamental right to education and healthcare, relegated to the margins of society, and the opportunity to thrive. I am here to make sure that their voices are heard and the voices of the millions of young migrants across Europe and North America do not go ignored in this process.

Let us not be blind to the potential that lies within these courageous souls. Let us recognize the richness of their diversity, the depth of their resilience, and the power of their dreams. For it is in empowering them that we empower our collective future.

In conclusion, let us remember the voices of the youth and children who are at the heart of these policies. By prioritizing youth inclusion and addressing the identified priorities of access to education, trafficking of persons, regular pathways, alternatives to detention, and labor exploitation, we can create a more just, equitable, and inclusive future for all young migrants across our region. **Investing in these ideals is not an act of charity but a contribution and commitment to our shared humanity.** The work is being done today for tomorrow. But we need your trust and your support - governments, agencies, and mechanisms alike. All we ask is that you let us be heard, and work with us in creating a better future for all.

Thank you.

*Delivered 11 March 2024 at the Palais de Nations (Geneva, Switzerland)
by Europe Officer Feblezi Hubei*

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