

Demanding recognition: the right to the city from migrant youth

Policy Brief

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This document contains recommendations on the right to the city drawn up by young migrants supported by the BarcelonActua Foundation, members of the first edition of the Creative Democracy course at the Platoniq Foundation's School of Creativity and Democracy, and young activists involved in the fight for the rights of the migrant population in Barcelona.

Listening to those affected, especially young people, and placing their recommendations at the centre is one of the priorities that must be addressed in a Europe that is torn between openness and rejection of plurality.

A project led by:

Fundación Platoniq

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Index

Context

Public policy recommendations

About the process

We are not migrants, we are people

Young people must be at the forefront of developing public policies that affect them

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Context

Young migrants in Barcelona face multiple vulnerabilities, combining deficiencies in education, employment, housing and emotional well-being. At the same time, cultural and symbolic barriers persist, hindering mutual and full integration.

Across Catalonia, some 160,000 immigrants currently live in an irregular administrative situation, of whom approximately one third reside in Barcelona. This brings the total number of undocumented people in Barcelona to around 57,000. Although there are no official figures on how many young people aged 16–25 are in an irregular situation, we know that 17.9% of homeless people in Barcelona are young migrants. In addition, street outreach organisations indicate that around 10% of homeless people assisted by municipal teams were between 18 and 25 years old, most of them unaccompanied migrants who, upon reaching the age of majority, are left without protection. As for unaccompanied minors, in 2023 some 2,331 arrived in Catalonia and 501 were assisted in Barcelona.

In 2021, the Ombudsman's Office of the Government of Catalonia estimated that around 150 young people who had left care were living on the streets, compared to around 500 in 2020, of whom 30.9% lacked stable accommodation. In total, more than 1,300 young people will turn 18 in 2025, according to the Department of Social Rights, which means they will need real emancipation plans (housing, emotional support, training, employment).

The 16–23 age group is the most visible, with active permits (17,452). However, once they cross the 18–20 age barrier, many face severe vulnerability due to the loss of guardianship, more restrictive regulations when it comes to renewing permits and obtaining papers for regularisation. This leaves an as yet undetermined number of young migrants without papers, without housing and without employment.

"I believe in quotas as a means, not an end, to achieve a society where the greatest number of people are democratically represented. As this representation does not currently exist, it must be enforced.", Desiree Bela-Lobedde



Co-designing scenes on the Right to the City

Recommendations on public policy

Through a participatory process based on Legislative Theatre, the young participants co-produced a series of policy recommendations in various areas aimed at improving the integration of young migrants in the city of Barcelona, based on the co-design of everyday scenes that reflect their daily reality.

These recommendations were reviewed by the workshop's policy group, made up of young activists, politicians and a member of the participation department of the Generalitat de Catalunya, who proposed and validated comments and amendments to each of the recommendations that emerged from the staging.

The recommendations are compiled below by thematic blocks, but we can give an account of how the process went and the completeness of the recommendations by referring to the Open Spaces participation platform, which was used throughout.

The first series of recommendations falls within the framework of Fair Transitions towards citizenship for young migrants in vulnerable situations and responds to a common problem among "undocumented migrants, namely how young migrants of legal age, especially those in an irregular administrative situation, without a family network or living on the streets, face a fragmented system, with educational and residential circuits that do not communicate with each other".

The second series of recommendations responds to the digital administrative itinerary and human support in accessing rights. Both the participants in the co-design of the scenes and the policy working group highlighted the need to address the fact that "migrants face excessive bureaucratic complexity from the moment they arrive, marked by a lack of coordination between public offices, duplication of procedures, and a digital system that, instead of facilitating, hinders access to basic rights."

Thirdly, we find a series of proposals related to political participation and effective citizenship for migrants, which arose from the latent debates in scene 3 ("Right to Dream") and which cut across the three scenarios presented in the Legislative Theatre process. The issue that emerged was how "migrants who have been living in the territory for years, working, studying, participating in community or political spaces, still do not have full access to citizenship or fundamental political rights such as the right to vote or to be consulted on policies that affect them. This creates a second-class citizenship, deepens structural exclusion and reinforces tokenism when they are invited to participate only as users or witnesses."

These latest recommendations have not yet been directly verified with the participants. Platoniq assumes responsibility for validating, expanding or reformulating them collectively.

Recommendations on public policy

As a conclusion to the three scenes worked on, the young people co-produced policy recommendations together with the public policy team, and these are the convergences they presented:

1 Public network for welcoming and supporting migrants with migrant mentors

1. Create a public network of first contacts, made up of migrants with experience in support, community mediation or social work.
2. Create an integrated system for processing personalised administrative itineraries, accompanied by in-person support points with trained staff and digital literacy tools accessible in everyday spaces.
3. Link appointments to a specific file and an internal calendar within the public system.
4. Promote basic training for customer service staff in digital procedures, inter-institutional administrative processes, and intercultural skills.
5. Offer free digital literacy programmes for migrants, especially in urban areas with a high concentration of foreign populations.

2 Pathway to effective citizenship (pending validation)

6. Promote an exceptional administrative regularisation mechanism for migrants with more than two years of social or labour roots, linked to training, volunteering or proven community contribution processes.

7. Recognise participation-based roots as a valid category for initiating documentation processes.
8. Include migrants as institutional representatives in public offices, neighbourhood councils, citizen service offices, etc.
9. Explore the use of proxy voting in community assemblies or municipal forums, with legal and community support.

3 Reform of the criteria for access to housing and training programmes

10. Prioritise residential and educational integration programmes for people over the age of 18 without family networks or documentation, especially if they have been through resources such as CRAEs.
11. Avoid automatic exclusion on documentary grounds: allow access to programmes for those who can prove their roots through registration, participation in networks or community references.

4 Adaptation of public education provision

12. Introduce initial training courses without language requirements, with parallel language support.
13. Design training programmes tailored to people's interests, experiences and life contexts, without requiring formal qualifications.
14. Facilitate agreements with cooperatives and companies to guarantee paid internships and sustained employment links.

5 Recognition of skills and micro-credentials

15. Promote flexible accreditation systems through micro-credentials or certificates of experience based on prior skills (including informal skills or those developed in other countries).

6 Civil rights and political participation

17. Recognise the effective citizenship of migrants, regardless of their nationality or current legal status, through mechanisms that guarantee their participation in political, community and institutional life.

18. Create spaces for structured political participation based on recognition of migrants' trajectories.

19. Guarantee more accessible regularisation processes as a means of exercising citizens' rights.

20. Explore forms of intermediate political representation, such as proxy voting, the right to participate in local participatory budgeting, or binding inclusion in citizens' councils.

21. Allow people without the right to vote to delegate their vote to a trusted person with full citizenship in processes such as participatory budgeting or youth councils.

About the process

On 10 July 2025, 15 young people aged between 18 and 30 from Barcelona took part in a Legislative Theatre workshop on the Right to the City. We used legislative theatre, digital participation and participatory research methods to rethink the right to the city and its intersection with the concerns of the city's migrant population from the perspective of young people, with diversity in terms of class, ethnicity and gender.

Legislative theatre consists of creating a performance based on people's lived experiences in order to develop new policies and practices. The young people created three scenes representing their experiences in finding housing and obtaining papers for their regularisation.

The young people worked alongside an audience of activists and public policy makers, using the performance to challenge the norms that prevent them from getting the support they need and deserve, and co-created policy proposals that can make a difference to their well-being.



Melisa, Macarena y Ahmed en una de las escenas

We are not migrants, we are people

Each of these recommendations arose from scenes co-created by workshop participants. The first, entitled Thursdays at 3 (The Window), describes a bureaucratic scene based on the real-life experience of a migrant trying to complete their immigration paperwork. The sequence reflects the physical and emotional exhaustion, institutional arbitrariness and implicit discrimination inherent in the procedures.

The second, entitled Waiting for a Roof, represents the tension between the desire to find a safe place to live and the desperate wait to access reception programmes. It also reflects the lack of close institutional references and the dependence on informal networks.

The third, Right to Dream, requires a detailed explanation, as during the exploration that led to its construction, there was a moment that allowed participants to question the limits of symbolic participation when it is not accompanied by effective power.

"If I had known what we were going to do today, I probably wouldn't have come. Now, if you say to me: sit down, let's talk about politics, but not from my perspective as a migrant, I'll come! As an equal," participant.

The scene then shifted to the Legislative Theatre itself, calling into question the position of the process facilitators with regard to the young participants.

"Sometimes, even this space can feel violent if it is not designed with sufficient care. We don't want to talk about you, but with you. And sometimes we get it wrong. We are going to adjust the process so that the dialogue is truly between equals."

The participation of young people at risk of vulnerability, whether due to migration or mental health issues, as with any other issue, has opened up a debate among organisations dedicated to promoting social rights as to whether this is creating an over-representation of certain profiles, who may feel overwhelmed and pressured to explain their personal circumstances.

The position taken by this process on this issue is to prioritise those "affected" by certain policies, so that they are the ones who lay the foundations for social debate on the issues that concern them. By placing them at the centre, a conscious commitment is made to positive discrimination in order to balance the idea of representativeness, which is considered one of the causes preventing their full participation, as they are in almost all cases a minority in relation to the general population.

Young people must be at the forefront of developing public policies that affect them

One of the methodologies used was Legislative Theatre, through which participants work to challenge the oppressions they face and seek allies. During the performance, an audience composed of community members and policy makers plays the crucial role of spect-actors.

After the performance, actors and spect-actors improvise within the scenes to identify problems and explore and co-create solutions. As part of our work, we also enable young people to self-assess their own participation experience and perceived social impact. This process recognises the importance of lived experience in shaping policy and understanding its impact.

It also helps shift the focus away from individuals' behaviours and weaknesses and onto processes and practices, challenging models of care that frame people as victims rather than active participants. Young people benefited on multiple levels, gaining confidence and democratic skills in the process, which can also have a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.

"I think you all already know about the problems of migration; when you ask these questions, you already know the answers. Now the problem is that I don't have much to say about migration — I like politics, but not as a migrant," participant.



Policy-making team presenting their public policy proposals to participants