DePaul Migration Collaborative

Crevices and Crutches Laid Bare Executive Summary: Analyzing Government and Civil Society Responses to the Housing Needs of Irregular Migrants in Multiple Global Cities

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About the DePaul Migration Collaborative

The DePaul Migration Collaborative (DMC) is born from DePaul University's commitment to immigrant communities. In 1996, the College of Law founded its nationally recognized Asylum & Immigration Law Clinic. In 2015, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences introduced the first U.S. graduate program in Refugee & Forced Migration Studies. The DMC, a joint venture of the College of Law and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, embodies DePaul's continued dedication to interdisciplinary research and advocacy in migration and human rights, seeking systemic change through education and collective action, reinforcing DePaul's legacy as an immigrant-serving institution.

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About the Researcher, Ramya Ramanath

Dr. Ramya Ramanath is Associate Professor at DePaul University's School of Public Service where she chairs its International Public Service degree program. Her research—in India, East Africa and in the United States—draws on disciplinary perspectives in organizational behavior, urban sociology, planning, anthropology, and political science. Her projects are embedded in nongovernmental, governmental, and for-profit organizations, engaged in affordable housing, resettlement and rehabilitation, leadership development, and gender-responsive policy and practice.

About The Ruff Institute of Global Homelessness & Impetus for this Research Collaboration

Founded in 2014, the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) operates as a partnership between DePaul University and DePaul International. Through its Vanguard Program, IGH works directly with cities to set goals to reduce homelessness, implement evidenced-based policies, and share global learnings.

The impetus for this research came from a 2024 conversation with the then Executive Director of IGH. During that discussion, the IGH identified a serious gap in empirical knowledge about what is working—and what remains to be done—regarding housing solutions for cross-border migrants. The "mass influx" emergency was placing significant challenges in cities within the Vanguard Program, most visibly through widespread migrant homelessness. Consequently, the research that informs this report aims to examine how service providers interpreted these challenges and implemented migrants' need for short- and long-term housing.

Introduction

Cities can be exclusionary places for irregular migrants, a reality well documented in literature from across the globe. Such scholarship has noted ways in which the transformation of global cities—like Santiago, Pretoria, Montevideo, Chicago, and Glasgow—has enclosed the urban poor, including its irregular transnational migrants in precarious housing places, tainting them 'outcasts' in these receiving cities. Despite restrictive and exclusionary policies that criminalize and stigmatize irregular migrants, these and other cities are paradoxically also spaces that provide support and sanctuary to those who enter as or become 'irregular'. At the heart of this paradox lies the right to adequate housing—a fundamental human right recognized in international covenants yet rarely realized for large numbers of people, migrants and native residents alike. Bridging this gap between principle and practice provided the impetus for the research that informs this report.

To guide the inquiry, the report adopts two central concepts: *irregularity*, understood as a fluid condition including but not limited to those who enter a country without proper documentation, overstay visas, have asylum denied, or lose status due to bureaucratic delays, inefficiencies or executive actions; and the *right to adequate housing*, a commitment that does not require states to move away from market-based provision of housing, nor to provide public or social housing for all residents.

Methodology

This study adopts Bacchi's (2009)[1] "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach and a qualitative, inductive design. Data collection focused on cities within IGH's Vanguard Network that experienced a noticeable influx of transnational migrants. Semi-structured interviews (and one in-person focus group discussion) were conducted mainly via Zoom between December 2024 and July 2025, with participants including leaders and staff of nongovernmental and faith-based organizations, government officials, housing rights advocates, immigration lawyers, academics, and former and current intergovernmental agency officials. These primary data were complemented by a review of organizational archives, scholarly sources, and media reports, including Spanish-language works translated using Google Translate.

Analysis involved initial coding to identify themes and examine how participants framed problems and proposed solutions, with draft findings shared with select participants for feedback.

Brief Summary of Findings by City

The report uses the "What is the Problem Represented to Be?", i.e., the WPR, approach to analyze and present the findings. Rather than treating the housing challenges of (irregular) migrants as fixed or objective issues, it examines how their concerns are socially and politically constructed in each participating geography. To render these dynamics clear, each city report is organized into two paragraphs: one devoted to what is working and another on what remains to be done to meet the migrants' housing needs. Each narrative thus highlights how the dynamics reflect deeper assumptions about legitimacy and deservingness—assumptions that shape policy priorities and resource allocations.

Santiago, Chile*:* "How can we house the 'permanently' irregular migrant?"

In Chile, starting 2017-18, emergency responses provided necessary, short-term relief, but systemic barriers continue dominating the housing landscape. During the pandemic and periods of mass influx, state and non-state actors collaborated to offer temporary shelter, food, medical relief, childcare, legal protection and advice and short-term rental subsidies in border towns and cities. National and city-based NGOs play a critical role in preventing immediate homelessness. In Santiago, most irregular migrants find post-shelter housing in older and newer informal settlements (i.e., *campamentos*). Despite its precariousness, newer *campamentos* formed through squatting and self-construction in city peripheries, offer a sense of security and community. These are home to newer immigrants from Haiti and Venezuela who may have tried renting in older, well-consolidated *campamentos*. These spaces represent adaptive strategies that partially mitigate exclusion from formal housing systems.

However, the country's struggles with housing its new arrivals far outweigh these gains. Chile's restrictive immigration policies, including onerous visa requirements and near-impossible asylum processes, have created a large pool of "permanently irregular" migrants who cannot access public housing. Migrant homelessness is rendered invisible in national datasets, making targeted policy development and resource allocation challenging. Discrimination in the private rental housing market is rampant, with landlords imposing exploitative practices such as rentals without contracts, overcrowding,

[1] Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* Pearson Higher Education: AU.

unjustified rent hikes, and evictions without notice. The housing deficit, driven by an unregulated real estate market, compounds these challenges for both migrants and low-income Chileans. Recent anti-squatting legislation criminalizes informal housing arrangements, threatening the survival of migrant-built settlements and deepening insecurity. Despite a declared housing emergency and plans to build public housing, progress remains slow and insufficient, leaving irregular migrants to navigate a hostile housing environment with few long-term solutions.

***Pretoria, South Africa**: "How to house the "illegalized" migrant within a turbulent socio-political context?"*

Like with Chile, South Africa's prominent position within the region's political economic structure, attracts irregular migrants from other neighboring countries in the region. Some mechanisms provide temporary relief for marginalized irregular migrants but are fragmented and insufficient. Faith-based organizations, particularly churches, stand out as more reliable sources of emergency shelter compared to NGOs or government programs. Churches often offer rooms, food, and pastoral support when migrants fall sick or face homelessness, filling critical gaps left by formal systems. Migrants also rely heavily on informal networks—friends, ethnic associations, and mutual aid groups—for shared housing, legal assistance, and income security. Such solidarity practices help marginalized newcomers navigate the city's housing market and cope with discrimination and eviction threats.

However, systemic failures overshadow these efforts. South Africa's asylum system is widely described as "in crisis," plagued by corruption, backlogs, limited capacity, issues with access, and arbitrary decisions that leaves the marginalized migrant undocumented and "rendered illegal" for years. The country's adopted policy of migrant and refugee self-settlement and urban integration means that migrants compete with the generally overburdened urban housing market. Housing options—such as overcrowded township rentals, hijacked buildings, and backyard shacks—are insecure and often exploitative. Xenophobic violence in townships, restrictive funder mandates alongside NGO fears of legislative and popular backlash—further limit an irregular migrants' access to adequate housing. With shrinking donor funds and government ambivalence, most migrants remain trapped in precarious living conditions, relying on informal arrangements rather than structured, long-term solutions.

***Chicago, USA**: "How to safeguard sanctuary and provide adequate housing amidst growing housing mismatches that affect all?"*

Chicago's most recent response to the housing needs of those seeking asylum reflects both innovation and strain. Nonprofit and faith-based organizations as well as community networks mobilized quickly during the 2022–2023 influx of primarily Venezuelan migrants, offering them shelter-in-place arrangements, pastoral care, and case management through initiatives like the Faith Community Initiative. State programs such as the Asylum Seeker Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ASERAP) provided short-term rental subsidies to assist eligible migrants transition out of city and state-run shelters, while nonprofits worked to secure apartments and negotiate with landlords. These efforts, combined with Chicago's sanctuary policies and advocacy by coalitions, helped prevent widespread street homelessness and offered migrants temporary stability during a humanitarian emergency.

However, systemic challenges persist. Affordable rental housing shortages, gentrification, and racialized housing markets have forced many migrants into overcrowded apartments or shelters with restrictive rules. ASERAP's limited duration (three to six months) and complex eligibility requirements have left gaps, while privatized shelter administration drew complaints of poor conditions and mistreatment.

Newly arrived migrants remain ineligible for work permits until asylum claims progress, prolonging dependency on short-term housing assistance and sheltered homelessness. Recent policies, such as the 60-day shelter limit and the One System Initiative, aimed at merging the city's separate shelter systems for newly arrived migrants and long-term homeless individuals, may overlook migrants' distinct needs, risking deeper precarity. The city continually jostles with stubborn efforts, both locally and with federal involvement, to weaken or repeal its sanctuary protections. Thus, despite Chicago's sanctuary status and key legislative wins, most solutions remain temporary, with little progress toward long-term housing.

Montevideo, Uruguay: "How to implement a rights-based framework of 'decent housing for all' in a country that recognizes the inalienable right to migrate?"

In Montevideo, Uruguay, some aspects of the housing response for migrants reflect noteworthy progress, but significant challenges remain. The country's rights-based migration framework ensures freedom of movement and access to education, health care, and work for asylum seekers under the same legal framework as recognized refugees. Recent programs like "Residency by Rootedness" aim to regularize thousands of migrants in limbo. Civil society's advocacy, and government initiatives such as rapid documentation processes have helped migrants obtain national ID cards faster than most countries in the Southern Cone. The card is quintessential for formal employment and housing access. These measures, combined with Uruguay's relatively inclusive legal framework, create a foundation for integration.

However, housing conditions for irregular migrants remain precarious. Most new arrivals, especially Afro-Caribbean migrants such as Dominicans and Cubans, may start out in overcrowded and poorly maintained boarding houses (*pensions*)**,** where they face arbitrary evictions, violence, and exploitative rent hikes. Formal rentals require guarantees that migrants cannot provide, trapping them in irregular housing or pushing them toward *asentamientos*—organized squatter settlements in city peripheries. While these settlements eventually evolve into brick-and-mortar neighborhoods through lobbying for civic infrastructure, the process can take years and expose migrants to racialized discrimination and bureaucratic hurdles. Despite Uruguay's progressive rhetoric, systemic gaps between rights and housing realities persist, leaving many migrants dependent on informal arrangements with little long-term security.

Glasgow, Scotland: "How to be an effective 'battleground' for asylum policies and immigration politics?"

Glasgow demonstrates strong civil society engagement and innovative partnerships but faces structural constraints. The city volunteered as a UK asylum dispersal area and, despite limited resources, worked with charities and housing associations to accommodate asylum seekers. Glasgow accommodates asylum seekers through a system managed by the UK Home Office, primarily using a mix of hotel stays and shared housing in flats/homes provided by a private contractor. Third sector initiatives like Fairway Scotland stand out for providing dispersed flats, linked cash assistance, and legal advice to regularize status. Such initiatives integrate housing with casework support and advocacy, framing destitution as part of the broader homelessness agenda rather than an isolated migrant issue. Community-driven activism—such as campaigns by Glasgow Girls and organizations like the Unity Centre—has successfully challenged harmful practices, including child detention and lock-change evictions, while promoting rights-based solutions.

However, systemic barriers undermine these gains. UK immigration law imposes “No Recourse to Public Funds” (NRPF) conditions, excluding many migrants from statutory housing and benefits. Privatization of asylum accommodation led to poor housing standards, harassment, and lock-change evictions by contractors. Concentration of asylum housing in deprived neighborhoods fueled tensions and racialized violence, while chronic housing shortages and funding gaps limit the scalability of promising models like Fairway Scotland. Even with Scottish government support, most solutions remain temporary, and migrants with exhausted appeals or restricted eligibility face prolonged destitution and homelessness. The city declared a housing and homelessness emergency in November 2023, which by mid-2025 was described as “chronic”, disproportionately impacting migrants with restricted eligibility for housing support.

Concluding Thoughts

Each country’s policy and practices frame the irregular migrant as a particular type of ‘social problem’. In the five countries studied, immigration debates have turned so intense that national governments remain fixated on questions of who to admit and in what numbers, neglecting immigrant policy needs of adequate and affordable housing, and least of all the needs of their irregular migrants. Housing responses for irregular migrants are deeply shaped by fragmented policies and systemic gaps. As a result, across the studied cities, there is a persistent disconnect between migration and housing frameworks, resulting in unequal and often precarious access to adequate housing. Emergency and short-term solutions dominate, while long-term housing pathways remain elusive. Informal settlements, peripheralized spaces, and overcrowded units in areas with preexisting concentrations of racialized poverty emerge as both coping strategies and sites of vulnerability, reflecting the structural limitations of formal housing systems.

Additionally, the research emphasizes that a sole focus on the right to adequate housing is insufficient to address these challenges. While rights frameworks provide an essential normative foundation, they must be complemented by more inclusive frameworks, especially economic strategies that tackle affordability, security of tenure, and location. Without integrating these dimensions, states risk perpetuating cycles of exclusion and instability. Small-scale interventions comprising networks of state and non-state actors demonstrate the potential of care-driven practices, but their reliance on mercurial donor support underscores the need for systemic, scalable and sustainable solutions.

Access Materials

The full and final report is ready and may be accessed upon request via email sent to ramya.ramanath@depaul.edu.