



UPINION

Youth on the Move: Journeys, challenges, and aspirations across borders

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Key Findings

Overview

- The report reflects the lived experiences of displaced and migrant youth (aged 18–25), primarily based in Türkiye and Lebanon, through Upinion’s digital engagement platform.
- Insights are based on years of conversations with youth navigating migration, legal uncertainty, and integration.

Migration journeys: unsafe and traumatic experiences

- Youth faced violence, imprisonment, extortion, and severe risks en route.
- Many traveled without reliable information or support.
- National systems were often described as absent or even harmful, with very few people having received help from authorities in transit or destination countries, international organizations, or local organizations.

"I had fear of an unknown road on which I did not know where I was going."

Arrival and reception: From confusion to isolation

- Arrival often brought confusion, fear, isolation and discrimination — not safety.
- Many were not received by any formal service; help often came from fellow community members, smugglers, or local residents.
- Language barriers and lack of legal documentation created further exclusion.

"We were treated like animals by the officials. I never felt safe or understood."

Integration: Barriers to formal employment, exploitation, and no access to education

- Young people regularly shared a strong desire to work and study, but face legal restrictions, discrimination, and poverty.
- When working, it is often informally, underpaid, unsafe, and/or exploitative.
- Education is a dream but often interrupted by financial pressure, lack of documents, or unsuitable systems.

"We already do not have the minimum necessities for living, so what if I leave work to go study?"

Mental health: Overlooked and underserved

- Youth report feeling lost, angry, and isolated with minimal access to support.
- For some, coping mechanisms include withdrawal from public life or substance use.
- Youth call for pathways to dignity and purpose: through jobs, education, and the chance to build real connections with others.

"There is no safe place or person to talk to. It makes me angry with the system."

Youth's messages to decision-makers

- Youth seek dignity, opportunity, and a voice in shaping their future — not charity or being seen as a burden.
- They call for policies based on humanity, inclusion, and equal opportunity — not fear.
- They are hopeful, skilled, and ready to contribute to society.

"We are not looking for charity, but for opportunity. Help us be part of the solution, not to be treated as a burden."

Key recommendations

- **Protect:** Safe and legal migration routes, access to sufficient, reliable information, and youth-specific protections and emergency support.
- **Support:** Access to education, housing, employment, mental health support, and legal aid.
- **Include:** Youth participation in policy, peer-led initiatives, and youth-sensitive services.
- **Change the narrative:** From burden to opportunity, from control to care, from fear to solidarity.

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Introduction



This brief presents the lived experiences and pressing concerns of young people on the move, including displaced individuals and other migrants, across Lebanon, Türkiye, Yemen, Greece, the Netherlands, Syria, and Ukraine. It draws from a diverse community of mobile youth, highlighting their journeys, current legal and social realities, and their aspirations for a dignified and secure future. These findings shed light on the daily challenges faced during and after migration, as well as the urgent need for safety, stability, opportunity, and recognition.

Methodology



The study's methodology consisted of a conversation held through Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP), as part of a broader series of monitoring conversations conducted with individuals in Lebanon, Türkiye, Syria, Yemen, Greece, the Netherlands, and Ukraine over the past four years. Upinion has developed this online platform that allows it to securely connect and stay in touch with marginalised or hard-to-reach communities, including people in crisis and displacement-affected countries. The in-house developed platform enables Upinion to engage real-time with people in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, which are also widely used by individuals in the target countries.

Important to mention is that the DEP enables Upinion to send tailored, neutral information to respondents about relevant services or initiatives in their area, thereby turning the conversation into an information exchange. This sets the study's methodology apart from traditional surveys, as participants become active agents engaged in and influenced by knowledge exchange, rather than being simply providers of data.¹

Demographic information

The insights presented in this brief are based on conversations with young people aged 18 to 25, drawn from Upinion's long-standing engagement with communities affected by displacement and migration. These are individuals we regularly connect with across different countries and contexts, discussing a range of topics related to mobility, participation, and well-being. While we do not aim for statistical representativeness, the voices shared here reflect patterns and perspectives that have emerged consistently across multiple conversations over time.

¹ For more information on the recruitment of participants and Upinion's DEP, please contact augustine@upinion.com.

Youth engaged in these conversations are based across Lebanon, Türkiye, Syria, Yemen, Greece, the Netherlands, and Ukraine. The majority are Syrian refugees living in Lebanon and Türkiye, where Upinion maintains its most active community panels. These voices are complemented by youth from other migration- and displacement-affected settings, including internally displaced persons in Syria and Yemen, asylum seekers and refugees in Greece and the Netherlands, and returnees or internally displaced youth from Ukraine.

Participants reflect a wide range of migration experiences. Especially in Lebanon and Türkiye, many respondents have been living in their current locations for more than a decade. However, in Lebanon, Syrian refugees that only arrived recently are also joining the conversations. In Greece and the Netherlands, lengths of stay ranged from six months to ten years.

Legal status of individuals varies by country. In Lebanon, many youth reported lacking formal documentation or being registered only through UNHCR. In Türkiye, most community members hold a temporary protection status. In Greece and the Netherlands, participants are either awaiting asylum decisions or have recently been granted refugee status.

Data findings

Migration journeys and the search for safety

For many young people across Upinion's communities, the migration journey stands out as one of the most difficult and formative chapters of their lives. Across various conversations held, youth consistently described facing extreme risks: fear of arrest or deportation, lack of food and shelter, exposure to violence, and the loss of access to education.

Some individuals recounted being stopped at armed checkpoints or navigating routes controlled by militant groups. Some shared deeply traumatic stories of imprisonment, torture, or extortion.

"Being arrested by the terrorist organization ISIS was a turning point in my entire life. I lost one of my eyes under torture. I was sentenced to 6 months and the plan was to recruit me into their ranks. After about a month, I was able to escape. It was a bold and highly risky decision. I was taken to work building fortifications for the front and during that time I escaped." - Syrian male, Gaziantep, Türkiye

"The moment of absolute certainty of death, when we fell into an ambush by regime forces — I still see it constantly in my dreams." - Syrian male, Gaziantep, Türkiye

Others spoke of the emotional burden of being the main hope for their family's survival.

"Fear was inside me at every moment, and my mother's face, as she said goodbye to me and my little brothers, was saying, "All my dependence is on you." - Syrian male, Şanlıurfa, Türkiye

Across contexts, few young people reported receiving meaningful support during their journeys. When support was available, it typically came from international organizations, local actors, or occasionally from authorities in host or destination countries. National systems with formal oversight were largely absent—and in some cases, were even seen as part of the problem, contributing to youth's struggles through discrimination, neglect, or rights violations.

"We as Syrians, and I'm not just talking about myself, have always been under threat of deportation to Syria for the most trivial reasons. There are violations in immigration departments, racism and discrimination everywhere, without oversight." - Syrian male, Hatay, Türkiye

"It was a very difficult period, unfortunately. I was tired. No one supported me, no organization, nothing. I just worked to live with my mother and father. Türkiye is expensive. Rent, water, electricity, and internet. I was tired of this life. I was not able to complete my studies because of my financial situation. I was really tired, and I needed a knee operation." - Syrian male, Gaziantep, Türkiye

In addition to this, only a very small number of youth reported having all the information they needed during their journey. Many lacked guidance on how to stay safe during travel, which borders were safe to cross, how transportation worked or what it would cost, as well as where to go upon arrival. Without this critical information and support, youth often felt they were navigating unknown and unsafe paths alone.

"I had fear of an unknown road of which I did not know where I was going." - Syrian male, Akkar, Lebanon

"If there were safe ways to travel at that time, I would not have had to take a road with the risk of death under the control of terrorist organizations." - Syrian female, Türkiye

Recommendations:

1. Scale up investment in safe, regular migration routes, humanitarian corridors, and youth-focused protection mechanisms along migratory paths.
2. Increase funding for international and local actors providing emergency support during migration – particularly in underfunded transit zones.
3. Strengthen accountability frameworks for states and armed actors who obstruct or exploit youth in movement.

4. Ensure that youth have access to clear, timely, and reliable information throughout their journey – including guidance on safe routes, border procedures, transportation options and costs, and where to seek help upon arrival.

Arrival and reception: entering the unknown

Arrival in a new country did not signal relief or safety for most youth. Across countries, young people described arrival as a period marked by confusion, isolation, and fear. Also upon arrival, many did not know what to expect, where to go, or how to access help. Several youth mentioned specifically that they were received by no one upon arrival. When someone did step in, it was more often a fellow community member, local resident, or a smuggler—less often they talked about a formal authority or service provider.

Some youth recalled hostile or humiliating interactions with authorities, particularly at border checkpoints or reception centers. In several cases, youth were denied basic assistance due to language barriers or lack of identification.

“There were no services. We were asked to come to the security centers and stand in queues like animals. We were treated like animals by the officials. I never felt safe or understood.” - Syrian male, Hatay, Türkiye

“After crossing the Turkish border with the help of a smuggler, I asked to be taken to a station to go to the nearest city. At the station, I tried to ask for help from the police, but the reaction was negative and I was removed from the place. I tried to communicate with the locals, but no one understood me because of the language, and no one tried to help me. I needed a call, so I found a public phone.” - Syrian male, Gaziantep, Türkiye

Fear, isolation, and disorientation marked this early stage of displacement. Many spoke of entering the country "heading into the unknown," focused only on survival, with no guidance on where to go and what rights they had.

“There was no one. I was heading into the unknown. All I cared about was completing my studies, finding a job, and finding a place to sleep.” - Syrian male, Akkar, Lebanon

Recommendations:

4. Prioritize dignified, youth-sensitive reception procedures at borders and initial reception centers.

5. Fund multilingual orientation services and ensure early access to psychosocial support and

legal aid.

6. Work with host countries and civil society to eliminate discriminatory treatment of youth on arrival.

Integration and daily struggles

Work and exploitation

Young people regularly shared a strong desire to work, support themselves, and contribute to society. However, most encountered significant barriers; legal restrictions, discrimination, or limited job opportunities. When work was found, it was often informal and exploitative: delayed or unfair pay, unsafe conditions, or long hours without protection.

Gender, sexual identity, and nationality further complicated access to safe work. Some youth also reported feeling pressure to take any job available, even if it placed them at risk.

Education interrupted

Education is often described as a true aspiration—but one that often felt out of reach. Many youth had to stop school during their displacement and had not been able to return. The reasons are consistently: missing documents, unstable housing, financial pressures, or lack of suitable schools or training programs.

Notably, for individuals in Lebanon and Türkiye, the idea of returning to school seemed impossible unless basic needs—such as housing and income—were first secured.

“There is no government support for living here, no housing support, no food support, no social support, no education support, only health support and it is very poor. In order for me to go to study, the living obligations of rent, bills, food and others must be fulfilled. Now that I am working, we do not have the minimum necessities for living, so what if I leave work to go study? Who will compensate me?” - Syrian male, Lebanon, Baalbek-Hermel

Recommendations:

7. Create legal pathways for displaced youth to access work and education regardless of their asylum status. Provide scholarships, documentation waivers, and flexible admission procedures to enable school re-entry.

8. Promote flexible models that combine education and income generation — such as part-time learning, vocational training, and paid apprenticeships — acknowledging that many young people must meet basic needs while studying.

9. Support host countries in building inclusive education-to-employment pathways for refugee

and migrant youth, and invest in housing solutions that ensure stability during study or job-seeking or starting periods.

Mental health and emotional well-being

Feelings of mental distress, anxiety, and disconnection were frequently mentioned by displaced or migrant youth across conversations. Many described feeling lost, without a sense of purpose, and having no safe place or person to turn to. Some youth also shared how this sense of isolation made them feel out of place, either caused by or leading to frustration or anger toward the systems in their host countries.

Despite this, very few youth had received mental health support—and a considerable group of youth mentioned they did not know where to find it. Some turned to coping mechanisms such as substance use or withdrew entirely from public life. Few spoke of pressure to join harmful networks or groups in search of income or belonging.

“I feel lost. There is no safe place or person to talk to. It makes me angry with the system.” - Syrian male, Greece

“I feel a great loss of hope because of statements made by some Dutch officials about the situation of Syrians in the Netherlands.” - Syrian male, the Netherlands

When asked what would help them feel better, youth pointed to practical and social solutions. Access to job opportunities in their new context was seen as a vital first step—not only for income, but for restoring a sense of purpose. Many expressed the need for systems and services to treat them as human beings with potential, not just as cases or numbers. The ability to continue their education from where it was interrupted was another recurring wish, as was the desire to form meaningful friendships with local young people—relationships that could help rebuild trust and a sense of belonging in unfamiliar environments.

Recommendations:

10. Integrate accessible mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into all stages of asylum and reception procedures as well as youth services.

11. Train frontline or case workers to recognize and respond to the mental health needs of displaced and migrant youth.

12. Invest in inclusive pathways to education and employment, by preventing barriers and encouraging flexible, combined models such as paid traineeships, part-time learning, or vocational programs.

13. Fund community-based youth spaces and peer support initiatives for mental well-being.

Key messages of youth to decision-makers

Despite all hardships, youth expressed hope and determination. Many dream of moving to a country where they can study, work, and live a decent life in peace. Western countries, in particular, are seen as places of opportunity, provided they are willing to see young migrants as people with potential, not threats or burdens.

When youth have opportunities to share their key message with decision-makers, they ask for policies based on humanity, not fear. They want to contribute, build friendships, and be part of the solution. Several asked decision-makers to meet them, listen to them, and walk beside them, not against them. Their message is clear: “Help us become part of the solution, don’t treat us as a burden.”

Their message is not only about hope, but also about mutual benefit. Young people bring valuable knowledge—about displacement routes, the realities of human trafficking, and the gaps in protection—that can help governments and institutions respond more effectively to migration challenges. Beyond that, many youths are highly motivated, entrepreneurial, and ready to learn and work. They bring skills that can help fill critical labour gaps in aging economies and fast-changing industries. When engaged meaningfully, they become not just beneficiaries, but active partners in building more resilient, innovative, and inclusive societies.

In the face of rising anti-migrant sentiments, especially among certain segments of society, youth are asking leaders to take a courageous stance: to lead with empathy, to amplify human stories, and to invest in young people who are eager to help shape a shared future.

“If I ever met a decision-maker, I would say: We, young migrants, are not looking for charity, but for opportunity. Many of us fled war or injustice and have the energy and capacity to contribute to our new society. We just need a safe environment, to be treated with dignity, and equal opportunities in education and work. I hope that policies are built on humanity, not fear. That our voices are heard, not that laws treat us as numbers. Discrimination and racism hinder our integration and create a gap between us and society. Help us to be part of the solution, not to be treated as a burden. Migration is not a threat, but a humanitarian and economic opportunity.” - Syrian male, Hatay, Türkiye

“If I had five minutes with a decision-maker in a Western country, I would ask them to view young migrants as an opportunity, not a challenge. We have ambitions and dreams, and we want to contribute to your communities. I hope you provide us with real support for education and employment, and facilitate integration rather than putting up barriers. I also hope you will have more understanding of different cultures and be more compassionate, as this makes a huge difference in the lives of young people seeking a new beginning and a better future.” - Yemeni male

"We do not want to be a burden on the host communities. Rather, we would like to help you, to become valuable members of the communities, to receive education and vocational training courses, and to take our opportunity to start a new life that will benefit us and your countries." - Kurdish male, Istanbul, Türkiye

"Support us, be by our side, we are good people." - Syrian female, Gaziantep, Türkiye

Recommendations:

14. Recognize and invest in youth as contributors: Acknowledge young migrants as individuals with potential—not as burdens. Create inclusive policies that support their access to education, training, and employment.

15. Ensure meaningful youth participation in policymaking: Engage with displaced youth not only through service delivery, but through dialogue and presence. As one youth put it, "walk beside us, not against us"—policies should be built with youth, not just for them.

16. Promote inclusion and actively address discrimination: Address racism and xenophobia through anti-discrimination policies and ensure equal access to services, education, and the labor market.

17. Promote dignity-based narratives and public messaging: Adopt language and policies that treat youth as people. Shift public discourse from fear to shared opportunity.

Conclusion

This report highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by crisis-affected youth across several countries. Their experiences underscore how displacement and migration affects not only their mobility, but also their access to education, employment, legal protection, and psychosocial well-being. From the moment of departure to their efforts to integrate into host communities, many encounter barriers that limit their ability to move forward and rebuild their lives.

While contexts differ, several common patterns emerge: limited legal status, restricted access to support services, precarious work and housing conditions, disrupted education, and a lack of mental health support. These challenges are often compounded by experiences of discrimination or uncertainty about the future. Despite these circumstances, most youth express a clear willingness to work, study, and contribute positively to their new environments — if given the opportunity.

The voices of youth on the move reveal both the cost of inaction and the promise of change. These young people are not simply individuals who need aid or subjects of policy — they are agents of their own futures, ready to rebuild and contribute. But they need systems that believe in them.

As such, the report calls for a sustained, coordinated effort to improve the conditions and prospects of displaced and migrant youth. Western governments have a pivotal role to play: in strengthening legal pathways, supporting inclusive education and labor market access, and ensuring that mental health and protection services are available and accessible. But also in reshaping the narrative — from burden to opportunity, from control to care. The time to act with humanity, creativity, and courage is now.

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