FINDING OUR PLACE

The experiences of recently arrived Latin American young people

Navigating education, housing and belonging

Peer research report

2025-2026

irmo INDOAMERICAN REFUGEE AND MIGRANT ORGANISATION

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Executive Summary

Every year, thousands of Latin Americans arrive in the UK. Many of them are teenagers, and for them migration means far more than moving from one place to another. It means entering an unfamiliar education system partway through, learning a new language while sitting exams in it, rebuilding friendships and support networks, and doing all of this during the years when identity, relationships and plans for the future take shape. Yet, remarkably little is known about how recently arrived young Latin Americans experience life in London. The community has no distinct ethnic category in UK government data, so there are no official figures on how many young Latin Americans are in London's schools, how long they wait for a place, or how they get on once they arrive. This research was designed to help fill that gap, and to do so by placing young people themselves at the centre of the process.

The research was designed, carried out and analysed by five young peer researchers, all of them young Latin Americans living in London, working alongside our Advocacy, Research and Campaigns team. After completing training in research methods, they defined the question that guided the project: **how do recently arrived young Latin Americans in London experience education, housing and belonging?**

They conducted eleven in-depth interviews and designed a survey in Spanish and Portuguese that reached a further 29 young people. Participants were aged between 15 and 22, came from twelve countries, and most had migrated to the UK after the age of 14. The peer researchers led the analysis, reading transcripts, coding them together and deciding collectively which themes best represented what they had heard.

What they found, across a wide range of individual circumstances, was a consistent pattern. Young people and their families were expected to navigate complex and unfamiliar systems, from school admissions to housing to healthcare, with almost no institutional guidance. Those who moved through these systems quickly could nearly always point to a specific person who had made it possible: a relative who knew the process, an older peer, a community organisation. Those without that knowledge in their network faced weeks or months outside education, and in the most severe case a fifteen-year-old had been rejected by eight schools within a month of arriving. The same held true inside school. Where young people felt supported, the support almost always came from a named individual, a bilingual teacher or a coordinator who went beyond their role, rather than from anything the school had systematically put in place. When that person left, or their capacity ran out, there was rarely anything to replace them.

Language ran through all of these experiences. Young people described arriving with knowledge they could not demonstrate, being placed in classes below their level, and being disciplined for instructions they had not understood. They also described what it felt like: becoming, for a time, a reduced version of themselves, and then recovering their confidence, their humour and their voice as their English grew. Housing shaped their lives in ways that often went unrecognised. Young people described sharing rooms with their whole family, waking at three in the morning to find quiet enough to study, and moving repeatedly as

rents rose, while families leaving hotels after years in temporary accommodation received no critical move-on information. And belonging, when young people found it, was something they had built themselves, through community organisations, churches, friendships and the Latin American spaces of Elephant and Castle and Seven Sisters, far more than something any institution had offered them.

None of this diminished their sense of what London could hold for them. Nearly all the young people who took part saw real opportunities here to study, work and build a future, and many were already helping others do the same, translating for their families and guiding newly arrived peers through the systems they had learned to navigate the hard way.

Our key findings:

1. **Newly arrived young people are expected to navigate complex and unfamiliar systems without institutional support, and the consequences accumulate at every stage.**
2. **Whether young people feel supported in school depends on whether they encounter a particular individual, not on consistent institutional provision.**
3. **Language shapes not only how young people learn, but their sense of who they are and their capacity to be recognised by others.**
4. **Housing instability and overcrowding affect young people's ability to study, rest and feel settled, but these consequences are rarely recognised as educational or wellbeing issues.**
5. **Young people experience belonging as something that has to be built through recognition and community, and this process is rarely supported by the institutions they encounter.**

The recommendations in this report were developed by the peer research team in response to these findings:

- Local authorities should make in-year school admissions genuinely navigable for newly arrived families, with clear translated guidance, flexibility in required documentation, and a named point of contact.
- The Department for Education should review the funding arrangements that currently discourage schools from admitting pupils in Years 10 and 11, reintroduce a consistent statutory assessment of English proficiency, and extend EAL funding beyond its current three-year limit.
- Schools should make the welcome and inclusion of newly arrived pupils a whole-school responsibility rather than something that depends on one individual, and should ensure that newly arrived young people can access emotionally appropriate support in their language.
- Government and local authorities should recognise that overcrowding in the private rented sector affects migrant children's education and wellbeing, ensure that families with No Recourse to Public Funds can access support through existing duties under Section 17 of the Children Act as well as other routes, and ensure that families leaving temporary or asylum accommodation receive practical guidance on managing their new home.
- Funders and local authorities should sustain the community organisations that young

people repeatedly named as the bridge into every system they had managed to enter, and public services should build systematic referral pathways with those organisations rather than treating them as a last resort.

- The Government and Office for National Statistics should recognise Latin Americans as an official ethnic category, so that the patterns this research has identified can be measured, tracked and addressed at a policy level.

About IRMO

The Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO) is a community-led organisation founded in 1982 that supports Latin American, Spanish and Portuguese speaking migrants in London through advice, casework, community programmes and strategic advocacy. Based in Brixton, IRMO supports over 3,800 people every year, including through its Children and Young People programme, which helps migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee families access education and secure school and college places, alongside English classes, mentoring and advice for parents. Within it, the Latin American Youth Forum (LAYF) is a weekly space for newly arrived Latin Americans aged 13 to 19, and the space through which the five young researchers on this project first got involved with IRMO.

In 2025–26, IRMO supported 96 children and young people who were out of education to access school or college, and 321 children and young people took part in weekly educational activities, group workshops and one-to-one mentoring.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Migrating during adolescence involves far more than moving from one place to another. It can mean starting over in an unfamiliar education system, adapting to a new language, rebuilding friendships and support networks, and navigating complex and uncertain immigration processes. All of this takes place during a formative stage of life, when young people are developing their identity, relationships and aspirations for the future.

Every year, thousands of Latin Americans arrive in the UK and navigate this transition. Yet, **despite their growing presence in schools, communities and London more broadly, relatively little is known about how recently arrived Latin American young people experience life in London.** Academic and policy literature rarely treats the Latin American community as a distinct group and, where young migrants are researched, attention often focuses on communities with greater statistical visibility. As a result, much of what is known about Latin American migrants' experiences has emerged through the work of grassroots organisations rather than through academic or government research. A small but important body of scholarship provides an exception to this gap, which we explore further in the literature review.

This limited evidence base makes it harder for schools, youth services and local authorities to understand the specific barriers facing recently arrived young Latin Americans and to develop responses that meet their needs. These challenges are also shaped by the UK's hostile environment, a framework of immigration policies that extends immigration control into areas such as healthcare, education, housing and access to public services.

1.2 This project

For over forty years, IRMO has supported Latin American migrants in London through advice, programmes and campaigning. A core strand of this work has been our Children and Young People programme. Across the Latin American Youth Forum, our ESOL classes and our youth community organising programme, young people have consistently described difficulties belonging, alongside a feeling of being hypervisible in some spaces and invisible in others. They wanted to better understand why some young people seemed to navigate these experiences more successfully than others, and to generate evidence that could inform recommendations to improve the experiences of future newly arrived young people.

This led a group of five young people to become peer researchers. They participated in a series of research methods training sessions and, drawing on their own experiences and the issues they wanted to better understand, the group landed on the following research question:

How do recently arrived young Latin Americans in London experience education, housing and belonging?

This report does not aim to provide a representative account of the entire young Latin American migrant experience in London. By placing young people at the centre of the research process, this report positions them as producers of knowledge whose perspectives contribute directly to the evidence base on young migrants in London.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Invisibility and belonging of the Latin American community

Despite being one of the fastest-growing non-EU migrant groups in London, the Latin American population has no distinct ethnic category in UK government data and remains largely absent from media and public policy (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016; McIlwaine, 2024). At the same time, around a third of Latin Americans in London report having experienced discrimination, alongside significant housing and language barriers (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016). Other research documents discrimination linked to ethnic stereotypes (Turcatti, 2023), the hypersexualisation of Latin American women (LAWRS, 2026) and barriers to accessing support after experiencing gender-based violence (LAWRS, 2023). Many in the community also experience what McIlwaine and Bunge (2019) term 'onward precarity', the multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage accumulated across migration stages, often having moved through Spain before arriving in the UK.

A small body of research exists on the questions of belonging and identity and Latin American youth. Research with young people shows how they navigate this actively, moving between ethnic, national and other identities depending on context (Mas Giralt, 2014; Turcatti, 2023). Both studies find that young people's sense of belonging is closely tied to whether their cultural background is recognised and valued in the spaces they inhabit.

2.2 Education

There is a substantial body of research on education and young migrants in general, and a much smaller one on young Latin Americans in particular.

The general literature describes, above all, an access problem. Refugee Education UK specifically studied 'late arrivals' — young people who enter the education system after the age of 14 — and found that many remain outside any form of education for extended periods, in some cases for more than a year. The Education Policy Institute (2023) documents waits of several months before obtaining a place, attributing these to complex admissions processes, lack of places, inconsistent practice across local authorities and increasingly reduced specialist teams. Schools also have few incentives to admit students in Years 10 and 11, the years leading up to GCSEs.

That same literature describes unequal support once within the system. The Bell Foundation identifies a policy gap around students of English as an Additional Language (EAL): the support systems that once existed have been dismantled, and teacher training rarely prepares staff for multilingual classrooms. When support does exist, this really benefits the student. EAL provision facilitates social integration and helps students navigate an unfamiliar education system (Hughes, 2021), but its availability depends on each school's resources and judgement rather than on consistent policy (Education Policy Institute, 2023). Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are among those most affected by this lack of support, with consequences for both their emotional wellbeing and their outcomes.

The Latin American-specific literature is limited in volume, but consistent in what it finds. As Latin Americans are not recognised as a distinct ethnic group in UK national statistics or educational data, there are no official figures on how many Latin American students are in English schools or how they perform (Bryant, 2025). Applying for a school place requires proof of address, and families who sublet or lack stable housing often do not have the necessary documents, a barrier documented both by IRMO (2016) and, in relation to the particular pressures on recently arrived families, by Gilsenan and Lee (2021). Community organisations respond where the system does not, supporting admissions, offering English classes and sustaining spaces of belonging (Bryant, 2025; Mas Giralt and Granada, 2014).

The only studies to examine how Latin American families actually experience navigating the school system are Mas Giralt and Granada (2014) and Gilsenan and Lee (2021). Mas Giralt and Granada found that most families had experienced long waits for a school place, with an average waiting period of 28 weeks — consistent with the wider literature on migrant education and grounded in community-specific evidence. Gilsenan and Lee (2021) found that precarious working conditions — low-paid informal employment, subletting without documentation — generate anxiety that limits parents' capacity to engage with their children's schooling. Low English proficiency and feelings of powerlessness compound their difficulty in advocating for their children when educational difficulties arise.

Beyond access, Gilsenan (2018) explores how migration intersects with adolescent identity formation among young Latin American students. Drawing on psychosocial frameworks, the study shows how language acquisition, experiences of upheaval and mental health all shape how young people navigate school life, and makes recommendations for how practitioners can better respond.

2.3 Housing

There is little research specifically on the housing experiences of young Latin Americans. However, available studies indicate that the Latin American population in London lives, more often than average, in overcrowded private housing (McIlwaine, 2016) and is overrepresented in temporary accommodation (LAWRS, 2026). Poor housing conditions contribute to young people from ethnic minorities experiencing feelings of abandonment, lack of control over their lives and exclusion from future opportunities (Lambeth Peer Action Collective, 2022). In addition, housing instability directly affects educational trajectories, as frequent changes of address interrupt school attendance and weaken students' social and support networks (Coram, 2013; Education Policy Institute, 2023).

2.4 Participatory research

This project draws on the tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which has its intellectual roots in Latin America. Paulo Freire (1968) and Orlando Fals-Borda (1987) argued that knowledge should be produced with communities rather than about them, as part of a process of social transformation rather than purely academic knowledge production. Applied with young people, this tradition developed into Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Cammarota and Fine, 2008).

In migration contexts, this approach is particularly significant. Research with migrant communities has often been extractive, conducted by external institutions with little benefit for participants, reinforcing frameworks that position migrants as objects of study rather than producers of knowledge. Peer research offers an alternative by enabling people with direct experience of an issue to shape the research process and generate knowledge grounded in lived experience. As well as producing richer insights through the trust built between peers, this participatory approach can strengthen participants' leadership, critical thinking and civic participation (Jagosh et al., 2012).

The closest practical reference point for this project was Lambeth Peer Action Collective (LPAC), a collective of young people and youth organisations based in Lambeth. Since 2021, LPAC has supported young people to research issues affecting their communities, including the causes of youth violence, through interviews, creative workshops and other participatory methods. Their findings have been translated into a manifesto and sustained social action. IRMO's involvement in LPAC directly informed the design of this project.

3. Research Process and Methodology

3.1 Our team — Who are we?

The five young researchers: Victoria, Isabel, Katerin, Ronald and Andrés, joined as peer researchers after having participated in LAYF (Latin American Youth Forum), IRMO's youth space, and our Youth Organising programme.

Victoria

My name is Victoria, I'm from Bolivia, and I have a real passion for writing. I once heard a phrase that has stayed with me ever since: "Latin culture is a sleeping giant" — and we need to wake it up. The reason I decided to be part of this project comes from exactly that sense of belonging. I'd like to help identify the needs of our community and help build spaces where Hispanic people can feel represented, supported, and valued. When we find ourselves in a new country, we often have to adapt to a different reality without losing sight of who we are, and I believe our voice can be a powerful tool for making that happen.

Katerin

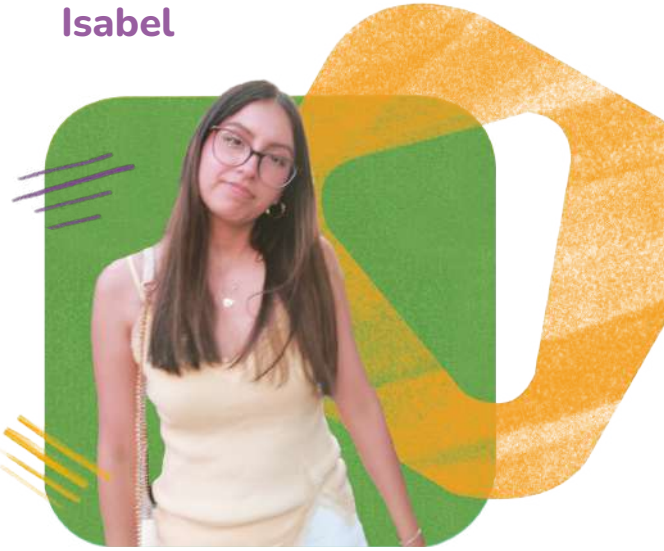
Hi, I'm Katerin, from Honduras. I'm 17 years old and I love everything related to beauty. My biggest dream is to have my own beauty salon, whether here in London or back home in Honduras, and to be able to support my mum and my grandad and show them how much everything they have done for me has paid off. I joined the research team to learn more and meet new people, and being part of this team has taught me how to listen to others, work as a team, and achieve what we set out to do — we started this research not long ago, and soon we'll be presenting it, which is a huge achievement! That's exactly why I joined this team: to be able to help others.

Ronald

Hi! I'm Ronald, from Colombia. I'm a curious and kind person who enjoys learning, exploring new places and meeting people from different backgrounds. I like to keep active and I'm always looking for new experiences and opportunities to grow. I believe that kindness and a positive attitude can make a big difference wherever you go. I joined the research team because I feel it's important to bring attention to the social issues faced by the thousands of young Latin Americans, and foreigners more broadly. I feel it's truly important work that will help give us young people a voice. I learned to see different points of view, to understand the different experiences each young person carries, and to look beyond the surface — to see the emotions and thoughts of young people who, like me, struggle every day to fit into a new society and a new country.

Isabel

My name is Isabel. I was born in Spain and my parents are Bolivian. Since moving to London, I've felt even more connected to the Latin American community and have learned to appreciate my roots even more, especially through this project, which I'm very happy to be part of. I see myself as a cheerful, positive and determined person who is capable of overcoming any challenge that comes my way. I joined this project so that Latino people can feel seen and supported, and to share what I've learned along the way — to remind people that they're not alone, and that there are organisations out there to support them and to keep learning from.



Andrés

I'm Andrés, I'm 19 years old, and I love everything that is organised and well planned. That's where some of my strongest skills come from. I'm the kind of person who thinks through every possible route, and I don't see walls as the end of the road. "A hunter of impossible utopias" is my guiding motto. I'm a very hardworking person — probably because I have a cat I love, even though he treats me as if he's the real owner of the house. I joined to be part of something. Purpose is hard to find, but once you find it, you realize helping others is its own reward. There are small problems and big ones, but behind every one of them are people whose hands and hearts were big enough to help — us included.

3.2 Training

Before beginning data collection, the team took part in a multi-session training programme designed to build the skills and knowledge needed to carry out social research. The training was based on King's College London's Research Methods: A Practical Guide to Peer and Community Research, which IRMO adapted into Spanish and tailored to be more accessible and youth-friendly.

3.3 Defining the research question

During the first sessions, the team debated which issues they considered most urgent for recently arrived young Latin Americans, drawing on their own experiences and those of their peers. They identified discrimination in schools, lack of information and support on arrival, difficulties accessing housing, exploitation in informal work, and the complexities of immigration processes.

Rather than starting with assumptions about which of these issues mattered most, the group chose an exploratory approach. They wanted to understand whether — and how — their own experiences reflected those of other recently arrived young Latin Americans. This discussion led to the question that guided the research:

How do recently arrived young Latin Americans in London experience education, housing and belonging?

3.4 Data collection

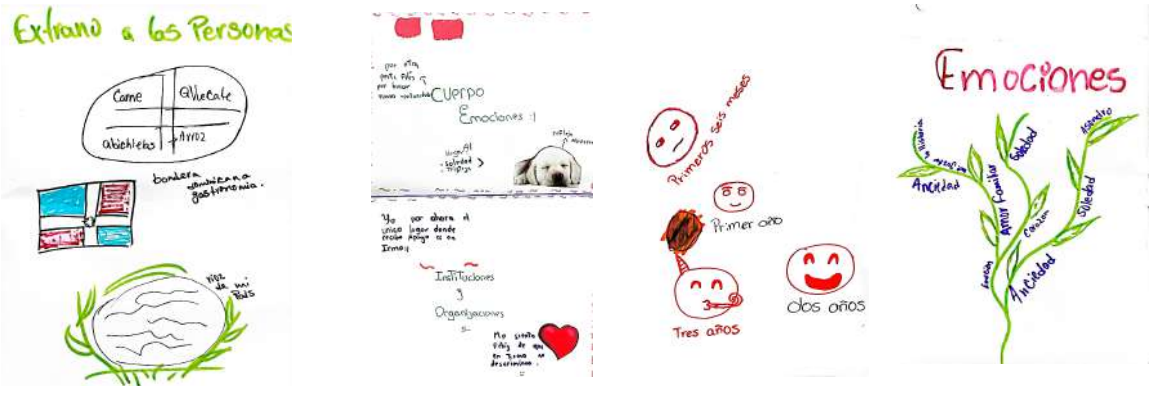
Phase 1: Semi-structured interviews

Once the research question had been defined, the team identified their chosen population: young Latin Americans aged 15 to 21 who had migrated to the UK after the age of 14. The researchers felt that migrating as a younger child could represent a substantially different experience from migrating as a teenager, and therefore agreed on 14 as the threshold age.

Given the community-based and exploratory nature of the research, the team agreed that a combination of convenience and snowball sampling was the most appropriate approach. The team shared the opportunity with their networks and IRMO shared it with its service user channels. Registered participants were also encouraged to share the opportunity with others who met the criteria. This approach allowed the researchers to build on existing community connections while extending their reach beyond their immediate networks.

The team then considered which method would best allow them to explore young people's experiences in depth. Upon reviewing a variety of qualitative data collection methods, they agreed that semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate approach, as they provided a flexible framework for exploring shared themes while allowing participants the space to describe their experiences in their own words and raise issues that researchers may not have anticipated.

Interviews were conducted during a dedicated data collection day at IRMO, a setting chosen by the peer researchers. Each researcher conducted two to three interviews, lasting between 15 minutes and 1 hour, for a total of 11 interviews. To complement, participants were also offered a creative activity to map their experiences across four areas: body and emotions (feelings upon arrival); community spaces (people and places perceived as safe or challenging); institutions they interacted with (such as schools, hotels, the NHS and IRMO); and culture and traditions (elements they had maintained, missed or adopted, such as food and music).



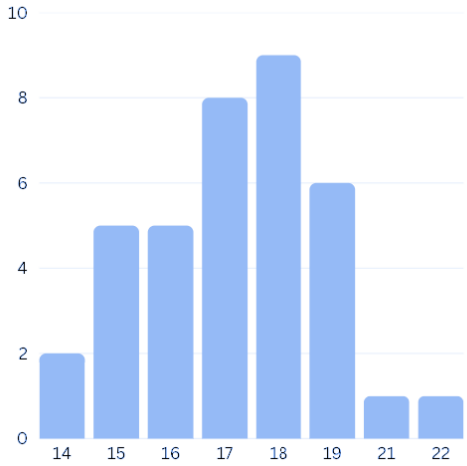
Phase 2: Online survey

As an additional complement to the interviews and creative activity, the team also designed a short virtual survey, available in Spanish and Portuguese. The survey sought to broaden the diversity of experiences captured by the research, complementing the depth of individual interviews with a wider range of perspectives. It included questions on demographic profile, educational access, school placement, housing, language and experiences of integration. Between May and June 2026, the survey received 29 responses: 27 in Spanish and two in Portuguese.

3.5 Profile of young people who participated in the research

The young people who participated in the research were aged between 15 and 22 and represented twelve countries, with the largest groups coming from Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic. All participants had migrated to the UK after the age of 14. The length of time they had been living in the UK varied: while the majority had arrived within the previous five years, more than a third had been in the country for less than one year, alongside participants with longer periods of residence. Some had migrated directly from Latin America, while others had arrived via Spain or another European country. At the time of participation, most were studying, and many had not spoken English when they first arrived in the UK.

Age distribution of research participants

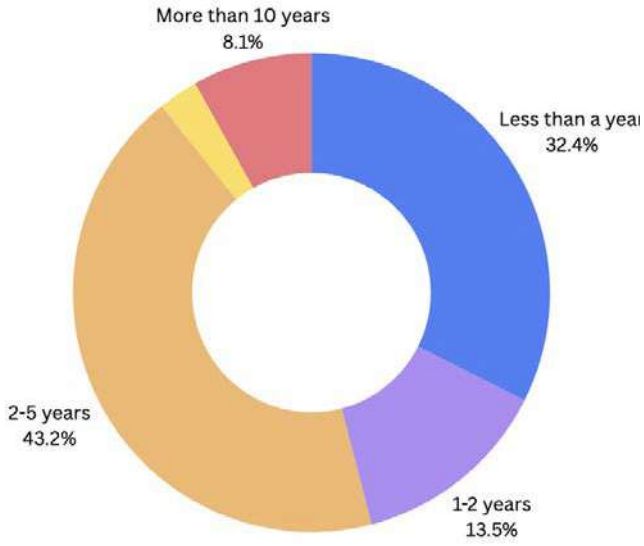


[Figure 1: Participants' ages]

Nationalities of research participants

[Figure 2: Participants' nationalities]

Time living in London



[Figure 3: How long have you lived in London — Less than a year: 32.4% | More than 10 years: 8.1% | 1-2 years: 13.5% | 2-5 years: 43.2% | 5-10 years: 2.7%]

3.6 Data analysis

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with the process led throughout by the team of young researchers. Each researcher read the transcripts individually, identifying recurring experiences, challenges, emotions and emerging themes. These individual readings informed a collective process of developing a coding framework, which was then applied across all transcripts. New codes were generated and refined throughout the process, following the iterative stages of data familiarisation, code generation and theme development that characterise this approach.

In the second stage of analysis, the team collectively explored which themes were most prominent and meaningful, and how different interviews connected with, complemented or challenged one another. Researchers reviewed their peers' interviews, rather than only their own, and were encouraged to openly discuss disagreements and differing interpretations. Through this process of shared reading, discussion and collective reflection, the young researchers determined which themes best represented the experiences and perspectives they had heard. The findings presented in this report were therefore co-constructed through a participatory process of analysis and interpretation.

3.7 Ethical considerations

This project received ethical approval from the Lambeth Community Research Network (LCRN), which reviewed the research design, consent processes and safeguarding measures for both the young people participating in the research and the peer researchers leading it. Throughout the project, the team used this ethical framework to reflect on how to ensure that young people felt informed, comfortable and supported when sharing their experiences.

Given the personal nature of the topics explored, the team recognised that conversations about migration, belonging, education, housing and experiences with institutions could bring up difficult memories or emotions for both participants and peer researchers. To address this, IRMO staff with safeguarding expertise were present throughout the research process and made clear that they were available to provide support whenever needed. The team also established confidentiality, consent and mutual care protocols before beginning data collection, ensuring that participants understood their rights and that their wellbeing remained central throughout the process.

All participants received a written information and consent form, as well as a verbal explanation of the project, its aims, what participation involved, how their information would be used, and their right to withdraw. At the end of interviews, participants were reminded that their contributions would remain confidential unless a safeguarding concern required further action, and were given the opportunity to share feedback on the research process. Materials were provided in accessible formats and interviews were conducted in Spanish where needed, allowing participants to express themselves in the language in which they felt most comfortable.

To protect participants' privacy, all interview transcripts and research materials were anonymised, with identifying details removed or changed. The team also ensured that research data was stored securely.

4. Findings

Throughout the interviews and survey, we heard about the realities of building a life in London as a recently arrived young Latin American. They told us about navigating unfamiliar institutions, learning a new language, finding somewhere safe to live, and searching for places and people where they felt they belonged. Their accounts were varied and shaped by their age at arrival, their immigration status, the networks they could rely on, and the specific schools, neighbourhoods and circumstances they encountered. But across this diversity, a set of consistent patterns emerged.

The findings are presented as five key insights. We use “many young people” or “the majority” to describe themes that came up consistently across the data. We use “some young people” for themes that were significant but less widespread, and “a small number” or “a few” for experiences that were less common but still important. Where survey data provides relevant context, we draw on it alongside interview evidence. All participants’ names have been changed.

Finding 1: Newly arrived young people are expected to navigate complex and unfamiliar systems without institutional support, and the consequences accumulate at every stage

> ***"We didn't know how. We had no understanding of how things worked here. And nobody told us anything."***

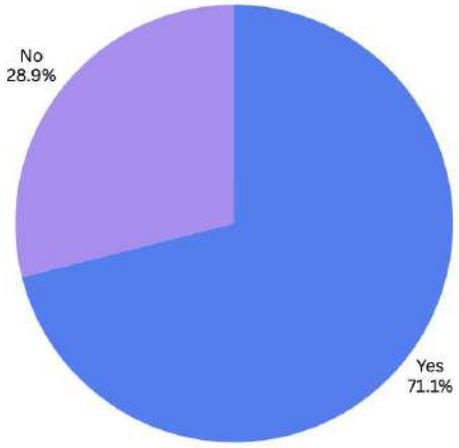
For many of the young people we interviewed, arriving in London marked the beginning of a prolonged encounter with institutions they had no framework for understanding — schools with admissions systems unlike anything they had known, housing processes with their own eligibility rules and documentation requirements, unfamiliar healthcare systems, and immigration processes that shaped access to almost everything else.

Normally, children and young people under the age of 18 do not know how these processes work in their native countries. **But, as a consequence of migration, young people are forced to learn how to understand the system as a way to support their parents and families with translating or navigating institutions, given the lack of orientation or knowledge given to families upon arrival.** When they succeeded, it was almost always because someone in their immediate network — a relative, a hotel neighbour, a peer or organisation — already knew what to do. When that knowledge was absent, the consequences were serious, and they rarely resolved themselves.

This finding traces that experience across the different systems young people encountered. It begins with education — where the gap between arriving in London and starting school was often longer than most people realise — and follows it through housing, where the same pattern of placement without orientation repeated itself. The knowledge gap does not close once young people are in the system. It recurs, in a different form, at every point of transition.

What the peer researchers say

School defines your future and your career. Because of how the UK curriculum works, based on ages, if you miss an opportunity or your access to education is delayed, it affects you in many ways later on.



[Figure 4: Are you currently studying?

— Yes: 71.1% | No: 28.9%]

1.1 Many young people spend weeks or months outside of education after arriving in London

Most participants who discussed their experience of accessing school indicated there was a waiting period between arriving in London and starting education. In the survey, the most common response to how long the process took was three months, though several participants reported it as closer to “a couple of months” or “a few weeks.” A small number mentioned getting a place within days. What was striking was that even young people who moved relatively quickly through the process described a period of uncertainty, repeated attempts and unexplained delays.

For some, this waiting period was short. But for others — particularly those arriving in Year 10 or 11— the wait extended into months, during which young people were at home, without English classes, without peers and without support systems that might have helped them. One participant explained they arrived in September, only to be told that places had already been allocated and she would need to wait, leading her to be out of education for five months.

At the most severe end, the barriers to school entry could amount to near-total exclusion. One participant, who had arrived only a month before his interview, had applied to eight schools and was rejected by all of them:

> ***"I came to IRMO the day after I arrived and they helped me to apply to schools but they all turned me down."***

He was fifteen and in Year 11. His rejection reflected the struggles of "late arrivals" documented by Refugee Education UK, where schools have few incentives to admit students in the final year of compulsory secondary education, and many will not do so.

Eight of the twenty-seven survey respondents reported that they were not studying at the time of participation. Their reasons included waiting for their immigration status to be confirmed, lacking the documentation required to enrol, or needing to learn English before accessing formal education. None of these should have prevented young people from accessing education. Instead, they point to a system that does not inform and guide newly arrived young people and families about their rights to access education.

1.2 Young people who access education quickly do so through personal networks, not through institutional support

Across all interviews, a clear pattern emerged in how young people had navigated school enrollment. Those who recounted a smooth, quick process — a place within days or a week — consistently identified a specific person or network that had made it possible: a parent who already lived in the UK and knew the system, a family member who had been through the process before, an older peer from the same country who had arrived a year earlier, or a community organisation.

"It was easy — my brother did it."
"I came to IRMO and they enrolled me in a school."

Almost no one described a clear, formal pathway that had guided them through the process without a specific person already knowing how it worked.

This pattern shows that the experience of accessing education is not equally distributed. It is shaped, above all, by whether they encounter someone who already understands the system. Young people who arrive with that advantage navigate quickly. Those who arrive without it are left to find their way, and the consequences of that difference are significant and lasting.

The role of organisations like IRMO appeared repeatedly as the bridge that substituted for what formal systems failed to provide. In the absence of any formal orientation or admissions support for newly arrived young people, community organisations had become the default first point of contact for those who found their way to it.

What the peer researchers say

Not being able to study doesn't only affect academic life. Young people feel lonely. If you don't go to school, where do you spend your time? They are more exposed and vulnerable to dangerous situations and to a life without direction.

1.3 The barriers do not end at arrival: young people face new knowledge gaps at every point of transition

Several participants described navigating not just one knowledge gap at the initial arrival stage but a recurring pattern in which every major transition in the education system presented a new set of systems, rules and requirements they had no preparation for.

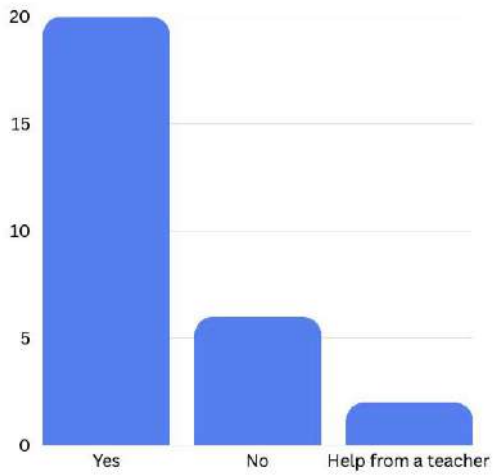
One participant, who had arrived in Year 9, described being given the choice between Year 8 and Year 9 without any explanation of what that decision would mean for her GCSE pathway. She chose Year 9 because she did not want to feel behind. Years later, she was sitting her English GCSE for the third time, unable to apply to university without it, having not realised until much later that the year-skip had compressed her learning timeline in ways she had not been told about.

"I still haven't passed the English GCSE [...] I'm very stressed, because I've asked all the universities and they all told me, 'you need at least a 4 to apply' [...] This is my third time sitting it."

Another participant, who was further along in his education, described still finding the post-secondary landscape confusing — how college pathways worked, what the steps between secondary school and university looked like, and what was available to him. He had navigated each stage largely on his own, often finding out what he needed to know only after he needed to know it.

The transition from school to college, and from college to university, involves a series of decisions — about what to study, how to apply, what qualifications are required, what financial support is available — that young people born and educated in the UK navigate with the help of families, teachers and careers advisers who understand the system. For recently arrived young people, this background knowledge is often entirely absent. What fills the gap, again and again across the dataset, is the same small set of resources: community organisations, a named individual at school, or the knowledge that happened to exist within their immediate family network.

Finding 2: Whether newly arrived young people feel supported in school depends on whether they encounter a particular individual, not on consistent institutional provision



[Figure 5: Does your school have an EAL coordinator? — Yes: 71.4% | No: 21.4% | Teacher support only: 7.1%]

"Only that teacher included us in school. There is no other support from the school."

Most of the young people described their experience of school in broadly positive terms. In the survey, 79% rated the way teachers and classmates treated them on arrival as positive, and 84% felt positive about their current school or college — the highest score in the education section. These are not accounts of hostile or uncaring institutions. What emerges from listening more carefully, however, is that the support young people valued almost always came from a specific person — a named teacher, a bilingual member of staff, a coordinator who went beyond their role — rather than from any systematic provision the school had put in place. The difference between a young person who felt supported and one who did not was, in most cases, not the school they attended but the individual they happened to encounter within it.

2.1 Most of the support young people describe in school came from named individuals, not from school-wide systems

Throughout all interviews and survey responses, when asked what had helped them at school, most young people named a person, not a policy or a programme.

Miss López appears by name in multiple interviews and survey responses, all from the same secondary school. She was described as a Latin American teacher who provided translation, emotional support, academic guidance, help navigating the school's own processes, and a point of contact for newly arrived students who had nowhere else to turn.

> ***"For every problem there is in school, people go to her."***

A survey respondent who had passed through the same school, now in her twenties and reflecting on her experience years later, made the structural implication explicit:

> ***"I don't know if other people had a teacher like Miss López — she was a huge support for the Latin American community in my secondary school. But if you have that support, everything is easier. I think all schools should have that."***

Miss López is the most visible example, but the pattern appears across the whole dataset. Another young person mentioned a Spanish-speaking teacher who ran after-school English classes voluntarily for a year and a half. Someone else named a teacher who was herself learning Spanish, and who used that limited shared language to help her adapt. Another participant said there was an English teacher and an EAL coordinator who provided dedicated support in the first months after his arrival.

2.2 When individual support is withdrawn or absent, there is rarely anything to replace it

The same pattern that produces positive experiences when an individual is present produces the absence of support when they are not. Several participants told us what happened when the person who had been supporting them was no longer available — either because their role was time-limited, because provision was withdrawn, or simply because their timetable did not allow for it.

A young person mentioned they received EAL support that lasted five months before being stopped. During those months it had been essential — he had arrived with almost no English, and the dedicated classes had given him a foundation. When the support ended, he was placed back into mainstream lessons without any equivalent provision. He said he managed, eventually, but the withdrawal of support was abrupt and unexplained.

The survey offered a sharper version of the same experience. One respondent, who had arrived via Spain and was in sixth form at the time of participation, mentioned she told her school that English was not her first language and found that this information made no difference to how she was supported.

> ***"You tell them your first language isn't English and they don't take it into account — it's as if they immediately forget it. You ask for extra time in exams and they don't give it to you because you don't meet the 'requirements'."***

She was in sixth form, beyond the age at which EAL support is most commonly available, and studying for qualifications that would determine her university options. The school's position — that she did not qualify for additional support — was, from a procedural standpoint, consistent with policy. From the standpoint of a young person still developing fluency in a language she had been learning for less than a year, it was experienced as an active withdrawal of recognition.

The most difficult account in the dataset came from Lucía, who arrived in Year 10 with no English in a school where the provision for newly arrived students amounted to one teacher who included four students in a single subject class.

> ***"Most of them didn't bother to help me or give me extra support. They gave me the place as if it were nothing, and very rarely asked how I was doing. I literally didn't understand anything and had almost no support. Even among the Latin American students it was difficult"***

Mateo also mentioned he was given detention for failing to follow an instruction he had not understood, because the teacher assumed non-compliance rather than a lack of comprehension:

> ***"They told me I had to do something and I didn't understand... because they thought I wasn't paying attention, they gave me a detention."***

The school's disciplinary system was operating on the assumption that students understood what was being asked of them. For a student with almost no English, that assumption produced a punishment for a language barrier he had no power to close overnight.

2.3 Systematic support exists in some schools, but it remains the exception rather than the norm

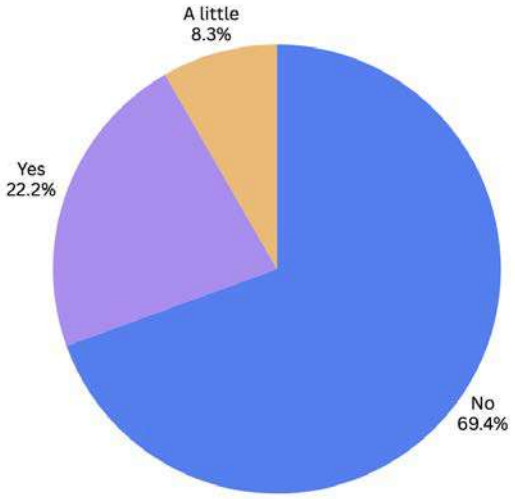
Not every account in this research evidenced an absence of support. A small number of participants acknowledged schools or colleges in which provision for newly arrived students appeared to go beyond the efforts of one individual — where there was something that functioned more like a system.

Isadora, who arrived from Chile with some prior English and the advantage of a British father who navigated her enrollment, described a school that had a dedicated intake unit for students who did not yet speak English. She spent a week there before being assessed and moved into mainstream provision. The transition was managed, the support was structured, and her experience of the school was broadly positive from the start.

In the survey, several respondents highlighted being assigned a bilingual peer on arrival — a student who could translate and explain the school's expectations — as one of the most useful forms of support they had received. One of them expressed it was the single most important thing that had made her feel she could navigate her first weeks.

Of the survey participants currently in education who answered the question, 15 out of 18 said their school had an EAL coordinator. Where that provision existed, ratings were high — young people valued it as genuinely helpful. But the open-text responses that accompanied those ratings told a more complicated story: EAL support that lasted only a few months, coordinators stretched across many students, provision that was good in the early weeks and then faded. The number of young people who said they had an EAL coordinator and the number who described feeling systematically supported are not the same number.

Finding 3: For newly arrived young people, language shapes not only their learning but their sense of who they are and their capacity to be recognised by others



[Figure 6: Did you speak English on arrival*? — Yes: 22.2% | No: 69.4% | A little: 8.3%]*

Twenty of the twenty-nine survey respondents arrived in London without speaking English. For most of them, and for the majority of young people we interviewed, language was one of the defining features of their early experience — not only as a practical barrier to learning, but as something that shaped how they were perceived, how they could express themselves, and who they felt they were able to be. **The experience of learning English is therefore not simply one of acquiring a skill, but of recovering their sense of self.**

3.1 Arriving with no English often means becoming a reduced version of yourself

Several participants described the experience of arriving without speaking English in terms that went beyond academic difficulty. What they lost, at least temporarily, was not just the ability to follow lessons, but to be the person they were. Valentina, who described herself as highly social and extroverted, put it this way:

> ***"I'm a very social person. So the things I couldn't do — communicate with people — hit me hard. I was like, I want to talk and I can't."***

The person she was back home was temporarily unreachable. Daniela, who had a similar experience, captured what changed when her English improved:

> ***"Now they ask me to participate in class. So I feel like a normal person who can actually do things, and not just someone sitting there."***

Being asked to participate, being visible in the classroom, being treated as someone whose contribution was expected and valued: these were what made the greatest difference.

This experience of diminishment was not only about what young people could not yet express, but also about what others could not yet see. Mateo, who had arrived at secondary school with almost no English, described the content of lessons presenting no difficulty: he already knew much of what was being taught, but he could not demonstrate it.

> ***"I could see that most of what they were teaching me, I already knew — but I didn't know how to express it."***

3.2 Schools frequently equate language and ability

The gap between what young people knew and what schools could see they were capable of, also produced a pattern that appeared across multiple interviews and survey responses: the conflation of language ability with academic ability, and the institutional consequences that followed from it.

Mateo's account of being given detention for failing to follow an instruction he had not understood — discussed in Finding 2 — is one version of this. The school's disciplinary system treated non-comprehension as non-compliance, because it had no framework for distinguishing between the two. But the same conflation appeared in subtler and more damaging forms.

Several participants said they were being placed in sets or classes below their actual level because their English did not allow them to demonstrate what they knew. One survey respondent demonstrated frustration of this directly, noting that she sometimes felt more capable than what the lessons required, but could not express herself fully enough to be placed accordingly. The mismatch between her knowledge and her perceived level was not corrected.

Valentina showed us a different but related consequence. As a self-declared perfectionist, she made a conscious decision not to speak English until she felt confident enough to do so correctly.

> ***"I didn't want to speak English until I could say, 'my English is good enough'."***

Valentina had seen and experienced the social cost of speaking imperfectly, of being heard to make mistakes in a language that was not her own. The response she developed — silence until readiness — was entirely rational as a protective strategy. But it delayed the very practice that accelerates language acquisition, and it meant that for a significant period, she was present in her school without being able to participate.

These accounts suggest that the language barrier does not only produce exclusion from outside, but also self-isolation and self-censorship.

What the peer researchers say

Translation of systems is necessary, not just of words. This difficulty is not resolved simply by translating information into one's native language. Migrants find it hard to access knowledge about how certain systems work — for example, how qualifications from their home country are recognised.

3.3 For many young people, learning English is experienced as a recovery of identity and agency

The accounts of language loss in this research were rarely static. Most participants who mentioned the difficulty of arriving with no English also described what happened as their fluency developed.

Valentina, who had spoken of not being able to communicate as something that "hit her hard," identified what changed once her English improved:

> ***"I'd say I felt more full of life, because I could communicate. And if something happened, I knew how to defend myself — anything."***

Mateo, reflecting on the same trajectory, offered a metaphor that captured something similar:

> ***"Now I feel like a machine that can't be stopped."***

Camila gave a version of this that extended beyond herself. Once she had sufficient English, she began helping newly arrived Latin American girls at her school navigate the same process she had been through. The peer support she offered was informal and unprompted — the school had not asked her to do it and provided no framework for it. For Rodrigo, who had arrived only a month before his interview and had almost no English at all, the trajectory was still ahead of him:

> ***"I don't know much English — almost nothing, just words. But in time I'll learn, because the country itself makes you."***

Finding 4: Housing instability and overcrowding affect young people's ability to study, rest and feel settled

> ***"I live with my whole family in one room (...) I have to wake up at 3am so that I can study"***

Housing ran through almost every interview and appeared consistently across the survey, often surfacing in conversations that had begun about education or identity. Young people did not always name housing as a problem in its own right — several rated their overall housing situation positively — but when they described their daily lives in detail, **the conditions they were living in frequently emerged as a significant constraint on their ability to study, rest, maintain relationships and feel settled.**

This finding explores what those conditions actually mean for young people's lives, why the transition into housing so often leaves families without the practical knowledge they need, and why the cost of housing in London creates structural conditions that newly arrived families are particularly ill-equipped to navigate.

What the peer researchers say

Access to housing creates uncertainty, insecurity and instability, particularly because of having to move constantly. This means there is not always access to a GP, and constant changes can create emotional challenges and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Lack of privacy also affects your mood, as you're never alone and that makes it hard to concentrate on your studies.
A common experience is that many newly arrived people secure housing through family and friends. Housing is hard to access: there is a lack of legal information and frequent evictions and housing changes.
The context each young person lives in indirectly affects how they experience life. Having information helps people know what type of housing they can access, and thus helps prevent overcrowding.
Immigration status is key. People going through the asylum process are particularly affected, and there are large differences in access to housing and other living conditions.

4.1 Many young people live without the space and privacy they need to study and recover

The connection between housing conditions and educational outcomes appeared across the dataset. Young people explained the direct consequences of not having a desk, a quiet room, or a space that was theirs.

One survey respondent told us she has to get up at three in the morning to study because it was the only time the shared space around her was quiet enough. Valentina, who shared a single room in a flat with her mother and two other households, said she wanted her own space not only for comfort but as a condition for being able to function.

> ***"I don't have my own room so I can't concentrate when I study, and I feel very sad thinking that I'm 17 and I don't have my own room and my own privacy."***

This participant was not describing an unusual situation. Several others across both the interviews and the survey were living in shared accommodation where private space was either absent or severely limited — sharing rooms with parents, sleeping in living rooms, or living in flats where multiple families occupied a space designed for one. One respondent explained her housing conditions were affecting her in many different ways:

> ***"I can't concentrate on anything, or have my own space, or speak freely."***

Lucía's account illustrated how housing instability and overcrowding compound each other over time. By the time of her interview she had moved through three different living arrangements since arriving — a shared room, then a slightly larger flat for five people, then a more comfortable place — and was facing another move.

> ***"First we were in a small place sharing a room. Then we found somewhere a bit bigger for the five of us [...] Then we moved to a larger place which was more comfortable, but now there are some problems and we have to move again."***

Even in the more comfortable arrangement, privacy remained absent:

> ***"I don't have any private space and we're all crammed together."***

The effects extended beyond the home. Lucía described feeling enclosed in the city itself, reluctant to go outside, the environment making her feel bad. The instability and overcrowding of her home life shaped how she moved through, and felt about, the spaces around her.

What was particularly striking was how her family had come to understand these conditions. When asked whether living in London had changed her relationship with her family, she said:

> ***"Sometimes being here makes us more stressed, but we understand it's part of adapting."***

The overcrowding, the stress, the constant moves were not understood as failures of support but as the expected price of migration, something to be endured. Several participants across the research described similar conditions in similar terms, which points to how thoroughly the absence of adequate housing support has been absorbed as a normal feature of arrival rather than recognised as something institutions have a responsibility to address.

The educational consequences of these conditions were mentioned by several participants who described the difficulty of completing homework, revising for exams or concentrating on coursework in environments that offered no quiet and no privacy. For young people already navigating a new language, a new curriculum and a new social environment, the absence of a stable and private space to study compounded every other difficulty they faced.

4.2 The move from temporary to permanent housing often comes without the practical guidance families need

Several participants had spent time in hotels or temporary accommodation before moving into more settled housing — a pattern that was particularly common among young people who had arrived as asylum seekers or refugees. For this group, the move into housing represented a significant moment, the end of a period of institutional dependence and the beginning of something more independent. **But for most of them, that transition came without any preparation for what managing a household in the UK actually involved.**

Mateo described this gap in detail. His family had lived in a hotel for two years while their asylum claim was processed. When they were told they could leave and were helped to find private accommodation, the practical systems of UK household life — bills, council tax, recycling, the processes that anyone who had grown up in the UK would have absorbed gradually over years — were entirely new to them.

> ***"My mum didn't know what to do next — she didn't know what to do once we got to the house... we didn't know how we were going to pay the bills or council tax,."***

Mateo suggested that someone should be responsible for helping newly arrived families understand how things work when they move into housing. This is not because families are incapable of learning, but because much of the knowledge expected of them is knowledge that people who grew up in the UK have picked up gradually, often without even realising it. Nobody is born knowing how council tax works. For families who have spent months or years in institutional accommodation, being given a home does not necessarily mean being given the knowledge and support needed to manage it. At the moment, families are largely left to figure this out for themselves.

4.3 The cost of housing in London creates conditions that newly arrived families are structurally unable to meet

Across the survey, the most commonly identified improvement young people wanted to see in housing was straightforward: lower costs, and more accessible routes to stable accommodation.

> ***"I think the price of rents — a single room now costs around £1,000, and for people who have just arrived it's very hard to find that amount of money because they don't have stable work."***

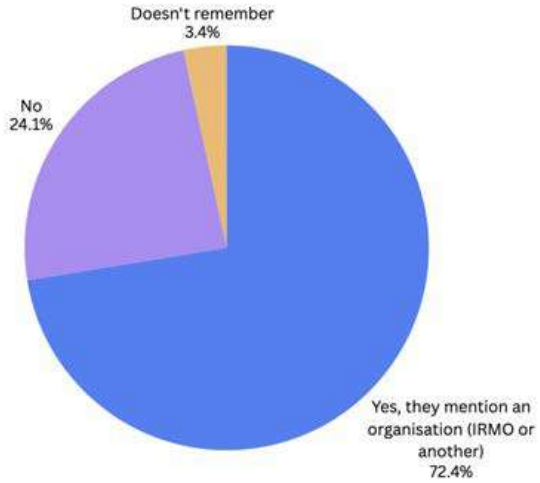
The respondent who wrote this was describing **a system impossible to access from the perspective of a newly arrived family** without established employment or credit history. Several participants referred to the consequences of these inaccessible prices: living in overcrowded conditions not out of choice but because it was the only accommodation available at a price that could be met; moving multiple times as rents rose or landlords changed; living in areas far from schools or support services because those were the areas where something affordable could be found.

One respondent told us they moved more than seven times in four years in London, each move triggered by rising rents or changed circumstances. Another described a neighbourhood she had lived in as unsafe, with a long commute to school, because it was what her family could access.

Finding 5: Young people experience belonging as something that has to be built through recognition and community — and this process is rarely supported by the institutions they encounter

Belonging was one of the most consistently present themes across the interviews and survey. Young people did not always use the word directly — they spoke about feeling seen, about places that felt like theirs, about the difference between being in a space and feeling part of it.

What the data showed, across a range of different accounts and circumstances, was that **belonging was not something young people received from the institutions they moved through. It was something they built, actively and often with considerable effort, through specific relationships, spaces and moments of recognition.** The institutions that shaped their daily lives — schools, housing systems, local authorities — rarely contributed to that process. Where belonging was found, it was found elsewhere.



[Figure 7: Have you received support from an organisation (IRMO or others)? — Yes: 72.4% | No: 24.1% | Can't remember: 3.4%]

5.1 Being enrolled in a school or college does not mean feeling recognised, included or able to express who you are

Several participants drew a distinction between being present in a school and feeling part of it — a distinction that was not primarily about academic experience but about whether the institution registered their presence as meaningful. Daniela's phrase — "we are not just painted on the wall" — captured this. She was describing the experience of being physically present in a classroom without being invited to participate in it: visible as a body, but not engaged with as a person with something to contribute.

Camila offered a related account that pointed to the social dimension of this experience. Her teachers and classmates were, she said, mostly kind to her. But she also described being excluded from the social life of the school, not through any active hostility but through the practical reality of still learning English in an environment where social interaction happened in English.

"Most of them treated me well, but at the same time they excluded me because I was still learning English."

Survey respondents described similar experiences. One participant described not feeling sufficiently represented in her school — her cultural background was not reflected in the environment around her — and finding herself gravitating toward other Latin American students as a result.

"Sometimes I don't feel sufficiently represented. I feel like I miss my roots and that I want to go back to find myself."

Lucía said she barely spoke to anyone at school, felt reluctant to go outside her neighbourhood, and when asked whether she could be herself in the UK, she was direct:

"Not completely — I feel I have to adapt to certain norms and I can't express myself as I am."

Her account was not one of active hostility but of consistent absence across multiple spaces — environments that had not made room for her, and whose cumulative effect she felt across school, housing and daily life in the city.

A small number of participants also described experiencing hostility more directly — in the survey, 44% of respondents indicated that they had experienced some degree of rejection or hostility related to being Latin American or newly arrived.

"I feel there is a subtle form of racism, as they laugh at our accents and the fact that we are Latin American, and teachers don't address the problem unless there is a physical fight."

In the interviews, several participants described incidents on public transport in which they or their friends had been verbally targeted, in some cases by other young people who used Spanish-language insults. These experiences were not the dominant account, but they were not isolated either, and they shaped how some young people navigated public space and social interaction more broadly.

> ***"Right now with all this situation with right-wing politicians saying things about immigrants, sometimes you're scared, because at my hotel people from the far-right have come to film, like saying that immigrants who don't pay live here. And there are also children here, so you feel unsafe."***

5.2 Young people built belonging through specific relationships and community spaces rather than through formal institutional provision

Community organisations like IRMO were named not only as a source of practical support but as a community where young people felt welcomed in ways that other institutions had not managed. Rodrigo, who had arrived only a month before his interview and had been rejected by every school he approached, named IRMO as the place where he had found his first sense of connection in London.

> ***"I really like how they treat Latin American people or people from other countries here. It's really lovely, honestly."***

Church appeared in several accounts as a similar source of community. Valentina described an Argentine woman from her church community who had become something like family to her. Mateo named his mother, himself, and IRMO as the three places where he felt welcomed. Several survey respondents named specific Latin American neighbourhoods — Elephant and Castle, Seven Sisters — as places where they could move through the city and feel, if briefly, that they were in a space that reflected something of who they were.

These spaces provided community through language, cultural recognition and by just being spaces frequented by a lot of other Latin Americans. Valentina described the particular social texture of London in a way that helped explain why these spaces mattered:

> ***"Here you arrive and live in the same place for 10 years and nobody says hello."***

For young people arriving from Latin American cultures where social warmth is a default feature of public life, this required a significant adjustment, and the community spaces they found were the ones that had chosen to operate differently.

It is also worth noting that the survey data pointed to meaningful variation in how settled young people felt in terms of community. 63% of respondents indicated that they had found a community or group where they felt comfortable, but 22% rated this negatively — indicating that for a significant minority, that sense of community had not been found. These were not exclusively the most recently arrived participants. Some had been in London for several years.

5.3 Despite the difficulties they faced, nearly all young people expressed a strong belief in the opportunities available to them in London

When asked whether they felt London offered them opportunities to develop — educationally, professionally, personally — 96% of survey respondents rated this positively, with 22 of 29 giving the highest possible score. This was the strongest finding in the entire survey, and it held across participants who had also described significant difficulties with access to education, housing instability, experiences of exclusion, and the challenges of building a social life in a new country.

The interviews reflected the same pattern. Several participants described London not as a place they necessarily wanted to stay in permanently, but as a place they perceived to offer education, political stability, professional possibilities — that they had not had at home. Mateo, who had come from Nicaragua as an asylum seeker and spent two years in a hotel before receiving refugee status, described the contrast with his country of origin:

> ***"I don't feel the pressures I felt in my country — my country has political problems, so you can't live there quietly. Here I feel opportunities: free education, university scholarships, being able to work at the same time."***

Rodrigo described London with an openness that acknowledged both its difficulties and what he felt it offered:

> ***"I can emphasise how beautiful it is here, even though there's a lot of loneliness. The places, the people, the streets"***

He named loneliness and a sense of possibility in the same account, without resolving the tension between them. This coexistence characterised many of the accounts in this research, and it complicates any reading of participants' experiences as either straightforwardly negative or straightforwardly positive.

A finding that recurs across almost all the previous themes is the importance of the emotional dimension in the experience of arrival. Fear, loneliness, nostalgia, stress, the feeling of being "trapped" or unable to express oneself came up repeatedly. Some young people said that in the first months they seriously considered going back to their country. Others highlighted the need for more mental and emotional support for those who have just arrived.

This suggests that adaptation should not be understood only as an administrative or educational process, but also as an intense emotional transition. The fact that one young person said, at the end of the interview, that they felt well “because I’m expressing myself and talking to someone”, shows the extent to which being listened to already constitutes a form of support.

5. Recommendations

The findings show that young people’s experiences of arriving and settling in London varied considerably. Some were able to access education quickly, move into stable housing and build supportive relationships. Others spent weeks or months outside education, experienced overcrowding or repeated moves, or struggled to find places where they felt included and able to be themselves. Across these different experiences, however, one pattern appeared repeatedly: young people and their families were expected to navigate systems they did not yet understand, and the support available to help them do so was inconsistent.

This was particularly evident in education and housing. Young people who accessed school quickly often did so because a parent, relative, peer or community organisation already knew how the system worked. Those without this support were more likely to experience delays and uncertainty. The same pattern appeared when families moved into more settled housing, where practical information about bills, council tax and other aspects of managing a home was often assumed rather than explained.

The findings also show that access to services is only part of the experience. Being enrolled in a school did not necessarily mean feeling included or represented, while having somewhere to live did not necessarily mean having the space or privacy needed to study and rest. At the same time, young people described strong ambitions for their education, work and future, and 96% of survey respondents said they saw opportunities to develop in London.

The recommendations below were developed in response to these findings. They focus on practical changes that could make existing systems easier to navigate, improve the consistency of support available to newly arrived young people, and strengthen the role of schools, local authorities, government and community organisations in supporting their education, housing and sense of belonging.

Education

The research found that getting a school place could take weeks or months. Eight of the twenty nine survey respondents were not studying when they took part in the research, with reasons including waiting for immigration status to be confirmed, lacking documentation needed to enrol, or needing to improve their English before accessing formal education. Those who experienced a smoother process often had someone who already understood the system to help them.

The issue is not simply that admissions are difficult. Existing routes into education are not consistently accessible to families who are unfamiliar with the English education system, and young people can be left without education while they try to navigate them. This is particularly significant for those arriving in Years 10 and 11, when finding a school place can be more difficult.

We therefore recommend:

- **That local authorities make the in-year admissions process easier to navigate for newly arrived families.** This should include clear and consistent information about how to apply, accessible and translated guidance, information about children's rights and available routes when an application is unsuccessful, and a clear named point of contact within the local authority. (Research and proposed solutions to tackle the in-year admissions barriers faced by newly arrived families, including inconsistent information between councils and the absence of a single point of contact, has been documented by the WONDER Foundation).
- **That Government reviews the funding arrangements for pupils who arrive late into the English education system.** In particular, consideration should be given to a dedicated funding mechanism for pupils entering school later, especially those arriving in Years 10 and 11, where the current arrangements create a financial disincentive for schools to admit them. (Refugee Education UK's research on late arrivals sets out the scale of this problem in detail)

Young people also described the importance of English language support. Several said that an individual teacher had made a significant difference, but that this support was sometimes limited or dependent on one person's capacity. Others felt that their academic knowledge was underestimated because they could not yet express it confidently in English.

We therefore recommend:

- **That DfE reintroduces a consistent statutory assessment of English proficiency and strengthens the way EAL needs are identified in schools.** This would help distinguish between limited English proficiency and gaps in subject knowledge, supporting more appropriate teaching, assessment and decisions about a young person's level — and directly address the experience described by participants in this research who understood what they were being taught but struggled to demonstrate this in English. (The Bell Foundation has made the case for reintroducing the English proficiency assessment removed from the school census in 2018.)
- **That DfE strengthens and extends EAL funding so that schools can provide support for as long as pupils need it.** The current funding arrangements limit support to three years, but academic English proficiency can take considerably longer to develop. Our findings similarly suggest that support needs do not end once a young person has acquired basic conversational English.

Accessing education was only part of the experience. Being enrolled did not necessarily mean that young people felt included. Some described bullying, exclusion and difficulty participating in school life, while others described how a supportive teacher or bilingual member of staff had helped them settle.

We therefore recommend:

- **That schools strengthen their approaches to welcoming newly arrived pupils.** This could include staff training on migration and refugee experiences, structured welcome processes, peer support systems, and opportunities for all pupils to learn about migration and different cultural backgrounds. The aim should be to make inclusion part of the school's approach rather than something that depends on an individual teacher. (The School of Sanctuary programme offers a framework for schools wishing to develop this approach.)
- **That schools create regular opportunities for intercultural learning and participation, alongside clear approaches to addressing bullying and exclusion.** Young people should not be expected to manage exclusion on their own because they are new to the school or still learning English. Where young people want to share aspects of their culture or experience, schools should create opportunities for them to do so without making them responsible for representing an entire community.
- **That schools, local authorities and relevant health commissioners ensure that newly arrived young people can access culturally and linguistically appropriate emotional wellbeing support.** Several participants described loneliness, anxiety and difficulty adjusting to a new country, while formal support was rarely mentioned as a source of help. Where support was available, it often came through family, peers or community organisations. Provision developed in partnership with trusted community organisations could help make support easier to access and more responsive to young people's circumstances.

Housing

Housing affected young people's lives in ways that were not always immediately visible when they were asked about their accommodation. Young people described overcrowding, limited privacy, repeated moves and difficulties finding affordable accommodation. These conditions could affect their ability to study, rest, maintain relationships and feel settled.

The research also identified a gap between being provided with accommodation and being supported to understand how to live in it. Families who had spent months or years in hotels or other temporary accommodation described not knowing how council tax, household bills, recycling and other everyday systems worked when they moved into more settled housing.

There are already legal duties and guidance around the suitability of accommodation provided under homelessness legislation. The issue identified by this research is therefore not simply an absence of standards, but the variation between accommodation systems and the extent to which children's needs are considered in practice.

We therefore recommend:

- **That Government and local authorities recognise that housing affordability and overcrowding in the private rented sector affect the educational outcomes and wellbeing of migrant children and young people, and that responses to child poverty, homelessness and housing need take this into account, in particular for families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), who are excluded from the housing and welfare support that would otherwise help them meet housing costs.** Many young people in this research were living in overcrowded private accommodation because nothing affordable and suitable was available to their families. For these families, housing precarity more often takes the form of extreme overcrowding, sofa surfing and constant moves between insecure arrangements than of rough sleeping, so it goes largely unrecorded in the measures homelessness and child poverty strategies rely on.

- **That local authorities meet their existing duties towards children in families with NRPF and strengthen the routes through which families can access support.** Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 already provides a route through which local authorities can support children in need, including children in families with NRPF. The issue identified in this research is the difficulty families and the organisations supporting them can face in accessing appropriate support in practice. Where a child is identified as living in conditions that affect their education or wellbeing, there should be a clear route to assessment and support. Clearer referral routes, consistent decision-making, adequate funding and better coordination between services would help address this. (Project 17 provides detailed guidance on the correct application of Section 17 in relation to families with NRPF)

- **That families moving from hotels or other temporary accommodation into more settled housing receive practical orientation and information about managing their new home.** This should cover issues such as household bills, council tax, utilities, recycling, local services, healthcare, transport and tenants' rights, with information available in community languages. This responds directly to the experience described by young people in this research, who were often expected to understand systems that were unfamiliar to them without clear guidance.

- **That protocols along the lines of SAFE, now in place for families in temporary accommodation, are developed for families in non-statutory routes:** those receiving section 17 support under the Children Act 1989 from their local authority, and those living in housing precarity who receive no support at all. Schools are often among the first to see the effects of overcrowding and instability. For families on section 17, the local authority could notify the school as it now does for temporary accommodation placements. Where there is no placement and no support, the starting point has to be the school itself. Staff recognising the signs of precarity, including that families often do not present it as a housing problem, and knowing which routes to support are open to them.

Community, belonging and support

Belonging was not simply about whether young people were physically present in London. It was shaped by whether they had places where they could meet people, communicate in a language they were comfortable with, maintain connections to their culture and feel recognised.

Sixty-three percent of survey respondents said they had found a community or group where they felt comfortable, while 22% did not. Community organisations were an important part of this picture. They provided practical information and support, but also created spaces where young people could meet peers, participate in activities and feel more comfortable being themselves.

We therefore recommend:

- **That funders and local authorities provide sustained funding for youth spaces and community organisations supporting newly arrived young people.** The research suggests that these spaces provide several forms of support at once: opportunities to meet peers, language practice, practical information, cultural connection and trusted relationships. Sustained funding would help ensure that access to these forms of support does not depend on whether a young person happens to find a particular organisation or programme.
- **That local authorities work with community organisations to provide accessible information for newly arrived families at key points in their settlement.** Information should cover education pathways, housing, healthcare, qualifications, immigration processes and available support, and should be available in community languages and accessible formats. Community organisations already hold detailed knowledge of how these systems are experienced by migrant families. Working with them to develop and distribute information would reduce the reliance on word of mouth and personal networks identified throughout the research.
- **That local authorities and other public services establish stronger referral and partnership arrangements with community organisations supporting migrant young people**. The research repeatedly showed that young people were able to navigate unfamiliar systems when they encountered someone who could explain them, advocate for them or connect them to further support. Community organisations should not be expected to replace statutory services, but their knowledge and relationships with migrant communities should be recognised as part of how those services reach people effectively.
- **That the Government and ONS ensure that the experiences and needs of Latin American communities are reflected in the development of the 2031 Census and future public-sector data standards, including consideration of a specific Latin American response option.** The absence of a specific category makes it harder to identify patterns in areas such as education and access to public services. The consultation on the 2031 Census and the harmonised ethnicity standard closed in February 2026, so the immediate ask is for the evidence from Latin American communities — including this research — to be reflected in the decisions that follow. (The Coalition of Latin Americans in the UK, CLAUK has been leading this campaign for over a decade)

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