Chapter 1

Introduction – Making the case for better data on irregular migration

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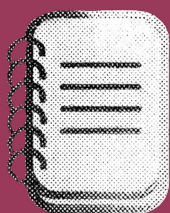
Key points

- Irregular migration data are often of low quality and misinterpreted by those who use it, when they are used at all. This Handbook provides clear and easy-to-understand guidance on how to improve the quality of these data and an understanding of them.

- Despite ongoing public and political interest, there has been a notable lack of investment in improving the methods and capacities for generating irregular migration estimates, particularly in European National Statistical Offices (NSOs). By synthesising key findings from the MIrreM project and highlighting good practices and promising innovations, this Handbook seeks to help bridge that gap.

- Ultimately, this Handbook makes the case that these challenges can only be met – and much risk mitigated in the process – through strengthened leadership on, coordination around and long-term investment in a Europe-wide infrastructure capable of producing, disseminating and fostering responsible and appropriate use of irregular migration data

Irregular migration is a subset of overall migration, typically only making up a small share of migration stocks and flows. Yet it warrants individual attention when it comes to methods for collecting, analysing and using data. We present this Handbook to assist ongoing and future efforts with the hope that it adds to this field of research in three ways.

The first is by bringing much needed guidance on interpreting different types of data on irregular migration, some of which are delivered on an almost daily basis in policy debates and the media. These data may be border apprehensions, interceptions at sea, deportations, or migrant deaths. Often, they are released and reported on without much contextual

information and lack detail about their quality, the assumptions that underpin them and what the data actually show (Kraler & Reichel, 2022). Definitions are fuzzy, terms are conflated. Flow data may be presented as stocks, or vice versa.

From time to time, estimates on the number of irregular migrants present in a particular country, a group of countries, or another area make it to headline news. Again, this is typically with little attention to the quality of the estimate or the context in which the estimate was produced, such as the population group covered, the reference year or the methodology used. Sometimes these data are specifically collected to inform policy debates in

response to the presence (or perceived presence) of irregular migrants in a specific area.

When data are used in these debates, it matters not just whether they are accurate, but whether they are well understood and used appropriately. As discussed in Chapter 11, the responsible use of migration data depends as much on interpretation and communication as on technical quality. This Handbook is intended to support both: offering tools for better measurement and clearer thinking about what these numbers do and do not tell us.

In short, the production of these data and their use in different types of debates are here to stay. We hope this Handbook brings clarity to some of these recurring policy, operational and social challenges. Many of the technical problems that emerge in this area – e.g., small populations, partial visibility, reliance on administrative proxy data instead of or in addition to traditional data sources – are shared by those working on other 'hard-to-reach' groups. As such, the insights offered here may also be relevant to researchers and practitioners working in related areas.

Box 1.1: A history of interest: Irregular migration data in Europe
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Irregular migration has been an issue of high salience in Europe since at least the 1990s, when migration flows to Western Europe surged following the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the displacement following the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. Beyond these major turning points, the primary receiving countries in Europe had already experienced a longer-standing increase in asylum-related inflows from beyond Europe, traditionally the main source of refugees in Europe. At the same time, legal migration increased considerably, facilitated in Europe by freedom of movement policies in the European Union and the Eastern enlargement. These developments fuelled a broader interest in migration, which in turn led to increased efforts to improve migration statistics at the national, European-wide and global levels (Kraler, Reichel, & Entzinger, 2015).

The political interest in irregular migration also went hand-in-hand with more systematic administrative data collection, such as on apprehensions, smuggling and deportation. At the European level, the first such effort was the Centre for Information, Discussion and Exchange on the Crossing of Frontiers and Immigration (CIREFI) data collection initiative, launched in 1996 to support, and initially conducted on a confidential basis (See Kraler & Jandl, 2006). This formed the basis for the Enforcement of Immigration Legislation (EIL) Statistics collected by Eurostat under the 2007 Regulation on Migration Statistics. Yet there was also growing interest in irregular migrants who have not come into contact with state authorities, but constituted an important part of the migrant population – and workforce – especially in Southern EU Member States.

A study commissioned by the European Commission in 1991 appears to have been the first to examine the scale of the irregular migrant population in a European comparative perspective (Werth & Körth, 1991). Another study commissioned by Eurostat a few years later placed greater emphasis on conceptual and methodological aspects (Delaunay & Tapinos, 1998). In some ways, this laid the groundwork for the first systematic European effort to collect, assess and produce estimates for a larger number of European countries, and to elaborate an estimate of the overall irregular migrant population in the EU as a whole: the CLANDESTINO project (CLANDESTINO, 2009).

Building on this foundation, MIrreM refines the CLANDESTINO methodology and adds important new elements. One is an exploration of innovative methods (Chapter 5). Another is a sustained effort to involve relevant stakeholders, raising awareness about the opportunities and limitations of data on irregular migration and encouraging more better practices in collecting, analysing and using these data.

Other recent initiatives address this issue as well. At the European level, negotiations on a new Regulation on Population and Housing Statistics have led to the creation of a "task force on implementation guidelines for a harmonised population base", which considers irregular migrants alongside other hard-to-count groups. Under the Conference of European Statisticians (CES), hosted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), two further task forces – 'Measuring Hard-to-Reach Groups in Administrative Sources'[1] and 'Defining and Measuring New Forms of International Migration'[2] – have collected practices from NSOs on how to account for irregular migrants in population statistics, including methodological approaches (UNECE, 2025).

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The second aim of this Handbook is to bring attention to the need for more high-quality European-focussed research on irregular migration data. Indeed, there has been a relative neglect in Europe of the irregular migrant population by demographers in general and by National Statistical Offices (NSOs) specifically.

While irregular migration data 'suddenly were everywhere'[3], irregular migrants as a population group and subject of demographic analysis are conspicuously absent from the statistical work of

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1 https://unece.org/statistics/documents/2023/11/working-documents/terms-reference-task-force-hard-reach-groups

2 https://unece.org/statistics/documents/2024/02/working-documents/task-force-defining-and-measuring-new-forms

3 Paraphrasing Kathleen Newland's (2010) observation on the ascendancy of migration as a key concern on the international level in the early 2000s.

many European governments, despite their salience in public and political discourse. As a result, our knowledge on the demography and socioeconomics of irregular migrants is limited, and often biased. In contrast, demographers and sociologists in the United States have for decades produced regular estimates of the irregular migrant population and its demographic characteristics, supported in part by the availability of population-wide surveys (see chapter 5). The US also has a higher proportion of irregular migrants relative to its total (3% in 2022) and foreign-born (25%) population than European countries which in some respects makes these estimation exercises more feasible (Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024).

That said, the relatively small size of the irregular migrant population in Europe – estimated at less than 1% of the total population and between 8% and 10% of the total foreign-born population since 2008 (see Chapter 4)[4] – should not be interpreted as grounds for inaction. Nor is Europe devoid of good practice, as evidenced by the many case studies featured this Handbook. However, compared to the US, quantitative estimates of irregular migration are infrequent, and – with a few exceptions – limited to assessing the overall scale of the irregular migrant population, with limited to no detail about demographic or socioeconomic characteristics.

Part of the reluctance within European statistical institutions may reflect discomfort with publishing estimates that carry high uncertainty and diverge from the conventions of register and census based population statistics. But this caution comes with its own risks. In the absence of official figures,

governments leave a vacuum that can be filled by unreliable or agenda-driven figures. These numbers can have outsized influence, and may, ironically, further discourage NSOs from stepping into the debate and improving the state of the art.

We hope this Handbook encourages more NSOs to take up efforts to produce reliable and well communicated information on irregular migration. To this end, this Handbook introduces several approaches that may be helpful, including capture-recapture methods, model-based simulations, residual estimation, and innovative uses of administrative irregularities.

The third contribution of this Handbook is building a case for investment into the infrastructure needed to support long-term improvements in irregular migration data. A recurring theme across MIrreM's work is that improving irregular migration data and their use is not only a technical matter, but an institutional one as well (see Chapter 11).

Eurostat, has already taken important steps coordinating irregular migration flow data through its enforcement of immigration legislation (EIL) statistics. It is well positioned to play a European-wide convening role around stock estimates. Longer-term funding, knowledge exchanges between NSOs and researchers, annual national updates and standardised reporting templates are all relatively low hanging fruits, which have the potential to transform the irregular migration data landscape in Europe for the better.

Conclusion

This Handbook does not offer a blueprint for improving the quality and use of irregular migration data in every context. But it does offer tools, examples and a case for long-term investment in the infrastructure needed to produce, disseminate and support the responsible use of these data. In doing so, we hope to reduce the risks of misuse,

foster greater consistency and transparency, and ultimately improve the capacity of governments and institutions to engage meaningfully with one of the most contested issues in European migration policy.

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4   The foreign-born population excludes those born in countries covered by free movement agreements.
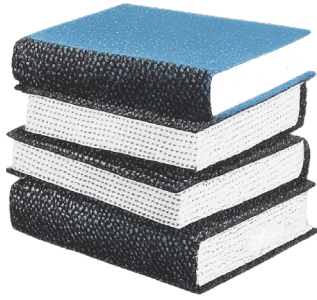
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