Chapter 8

Getting into the flow - what do we know now, 15 years since CLANDESTINO?

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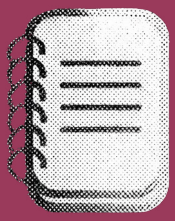

Key points

- Many countries have stock estimates of irregular migrants, but flow estimates are still scarce.
- Irregular migration flows are more often measured through statistical indicators.
- Compared to CLANDESTINO, the MIrreM Project has found that there are now more irregular flow indicators, particularly for geographic flows, and to some extent, also asylum-related status flows.
- The available EU-level indicators for irregular flows are generally of good quality, particularly with respect to accessibility and documentation, but there are some limitations in terms of validity and reliability.

Introduction: Counting the uncountable, measuring the unmeasurable

Immigration, particularly irregular migration, has become increasingly politicised, largely due to its entanglement with debates over national security, economic pressures, and cultural identity. In Europe, irregular migration has emerged as a "major issue" since the 1990s (De Genova, 2002; Sassen, 1999). In the EU in particular, it has dominated the policy landscape since 2015, following the large-scale arrival of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries (Siruno et al., 2024). Irregular migration has been conflated with asylum migration (Cantat et al., 2023), and public discourse often spotlights the perceived large "flows" of migrants, framing migration as a problem to be managed rather than a complex social phenomenon.

This reality underscores the importance of collecting good-quality data on the size of the irregular migrant population, not only stocks (i.e., the total number of irregular migrants residing in a particular location at a specific point in time, offering a snapshot of the migrant population but also flows), but also flows (i.e., the movement of irregular migrants over a defined period, capturing arrivals, departures, and net migration, providing a dynamic perspective on migration patterns and

trends). The first large-scale EU-funded project to do so was CLANDESTINO (Undocumented Migration: Counting the Uncountable: Data and Trends Across Europe)[1], which ran from 2007 to 2009. The final report presented the following conclusions (Jandl et al., 2008, p. 17):

The review of efforts to estimate the size of irregular migration on a European level has shown that the numbers indicated are based on very rough estimates. Often, we do not know which groups of irregular migrants are in [sic] included in a stock estimate, nor we do not know whether a flow estimate is meant to measure net inflows or gross inflows (without substraction [sic] of outflows).

Jandl (2008, p. 20) further pointed out that compared to stocks, flows are generally not well-measured:

...Given the highly volatile nature of migration flows, the scarcity of reliable indicators on illegal migration flows, and the dearth of appropriate methods for estimating such flows, most efforts have concentrated on estimating stocks of undocumented migrants rather than flows.

Now over a decade since CLANDESTINO, and with managing irregular migration flows a mainstay policy priority in the EU and other countries, this chapter outlines the main findings from the MIrreM Project's Work Package on Flows (WP4). More specifically, it provides a summary of the current approaches to measuring irregular migration flows, and addresses the question: what do we know now about irregular migration flows, 15 years since CLANDESTINO?[2]

Expanding the temporal and geographic scope, improving the quality assessment criteria

MIrreM is a follow-up to CLANDESTINO, and the following Table shows a basic comparison between the two projects in terms of timelines and geographic coverage:

	CLANDESTINO	MIrreM
Implementation period	2007-2009	2022-2025
Timeframe covered	2000-2007	2008-2023
Countries covered	12	20
	EU countries: Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, France, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, and UK	**EU countries:** Austria, Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Spain **Other countries:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Morocco, Serbia, Tunisia, Türkiye, UK, and USA

Table 8.1: Basic comparison between the CLANDESTINO and MIrreM Projects

1 https://irregular-migration.net/

2 This chapter draws mainly from the following WP4 deliverable, which was published in 2024, hence, 15 years since the conclusion of the CLANDESTINO Project in 2009: Siruno, L., Leerkes, A., Hendow, M., & Brunovská, E. (2024). MIrreM Working Paper on Irregular Migration Flows. University for Continuing Education Krems (Danube University Krems). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10702228

A notable difference is the inclusion of non-EU countries in the MIrreM project. And as discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of this Handbook, MIrreM has developed and used a more structured set of criteria to assess the quality of irregular migration data.

In addition, for irregular migration flows in particular, the MIrreM project highlighted the distinction between estimates and indicators. Estimates refer to statistical calculations or approximations that quantify both observed and non-observed or unknown irregular migration flows. Indicators, on the other hand, refer to metrics or variables that relate only to observed or measured irregular migration flows. In other words, indicators of irregular migration flows show the number of actual observations or cases, such as detections of illegal border crossings, whereas estimates use indicators to come to conclusions about a broader trend, including non-observed components, such as the total number of adults, detected and undetected, who crossed into a country without the legal right to do so. Two related but different sets of criteria were developed to assess the quality of irregular flow estimates and indicators.[3]

What we know now about irregular migration flows, 15 years since CLANDESTINO

Post-CLANDESTINO, scholars observe that available migration data often remain "inaccurate, inconsistent and incomplete" as they are based on differing definitions (Bijak et al., 2019, p. 471). In addition to differing definitions and measures, there are persistent and interlinked gaps based on the drivers or reasons behind migration, geographic coverage, demographic characteristics, and time lag in the availability of data (Ahmad-Yar & Bircan, 2021). International migration flows are particularly difficult to measure, and this is the case even with advancements in technology and data science (McAuliffe & Ruhs, 2017). Several international organisations, including UN DESA and the OECD, have been collecting and publishing international migration flows data, but different definitions and data collection methods present challenges in harmonisation and comparability (Yildiz & Abel, 2021). As there is an inherent challenge in collecting data on clandestine or irregular processes, the difficulties are even more pronounced when capturing data on irregular migration flows (McAuliffe & Sawyer, 2021, p. 48, emphasis added). So, while many countries have available stock estimates, there is persistence in the scarcity of available flow estimates as observed in the CLANDESTINO Project.

Because of this, irregular migration flows are more often measured through statistical indicators, particularly geographic and status-related flow indicators. Table 8.2 below provides a summary of the findings from the CLANDESTINO and MIrreM projects related to different types of irregular migration flows. In view of findings from CLANDESTINO, the conclusion reached then, namely that the methodologies for analysing irregular border crossings, visa overstays, and overall irregular migration flows lag behind the study of irregular resident stocks (Vogel et al., 2008), still rings true. However, the MIrreM Project has found that there are now more irregular flow indicators, particularly for geographic flows, and to some extent, also asylum-related status flows.

3 However, and as this piece underscores, compared to stocks, there is a notable lack of available estimates on irregular migration flows.

Type of flow	**CLANDESTINO** (CLANDESTINO Project, 2009)	**MIrreM** (Siruno et al., 2024)
Demographic	Quantitative importance is low or largely unknown but 'causing considerable human rights concerns.'	There is still a scarcity of data concerning demographic flows. While birth and death registrations are fundamental aspects of civil registration systems across the world, there is a noticeable lack of systematic data on births and deaths and irregularity.
Geographic	Most visible flows and border guard apprehensions are commonly used as indicators. However, published data from countries 'have not achieved full comparability' and there is 'even less information' on outflows (e.g., departures from the EU, movements to another EU country)	Geographic flows are still the most visible flows and there are now more geographic flow indicators. From 2021 for example, in addition to third-country nationals (TCNs) refused entry at the external borders and returned following an order to leave, the enforcement of migration (EIL) statistics collected by Eurostat also include the following (Eurostat, n.d.): • TCNs found to be illegally present by 'place of apprehension' and by the 'grounds of apprehension' • Quarterly rather than annual statistics on returns, and mandatory breakdowns by type of return, type of assistance received and destination country • Unaccompanied minors ordered to leave and on unaccompanied minors who returned following an order to leave.
Status-related	EU enlargement and regularisation programmes in Italy, Spain and Greece resulted in status-related outflows being far higher than inflows. Visa overstaying is the most relevant inflow indicator.	There are now also more data on asylum-related status flows. The collection of asylum statistics on the EU-level has also evolved over time. In 2021 for example, the implementation of the new Asylum Guidelines also involved the collection of data on the reason for the decision withdrawing status (revocation, ending, refusal to renew, unknown) in addition to first instance or final negative decisions and decisions withdrawing status granted at first instance or as final decision.

Table 8.2: Summary of flow trends from the CLANDESTINO and MIrreM Projects

Box 8.1: Frontex data on "illegal border crossings" and the political construction of "illegal" immigration

Filip Savatic

Since 2009, Frontex, the Border and Coast Guard Agency of the European Union (EU), has published a dataset on "illegal border crossings" (IBCs) into the EU and Schengen Area which is publicly accessible through the institution's website.[4] This dataset was initially labelled "irregular border crossings" until 2022, with the change reflecting a striking shift. Over time, particularly after the so-called "migration crisis" of 2015, this dataset has been increasingly referenced by mainstream media, researchers, international organizations, and other actors as a measure of "illegal" migration to Europe.

However, the use of these data as an indicator of irregular migration is problematic for several reasons. First, they capture only detected entries, and may, depending on type of border and context, represent an undercount of actual crossings. Second, they represent crossings and not people and thus may record repeat crossings made by the same individual multiple times, leading to an overcount of movements. Most importantly, the database does not consider valid protection claims of those detected while irregularly crossing a border. As article 31 of the Geneva Refugee Convention states, irregular entry is permitted when individuals are fleeing persecution (United Nations, 1951/1967). Given the absence of legal pathways for refugees to reach Europe, most asylum seekers reach the continent without any prior authorization, with many subsequently obtaining refugee status.

Deploying a novel method, Savatic et al. (2024) use data on asylum adjudications across 31 European states to divide Frontex data on IBCs into those who would likely obtain refugee status (or not) given their nationality. The average acceptance rate is weighted given the number of first instance asylum decisions by nationality made in each of the 31 states. First instance data are used to ensure comparability given that asylum appeals procedures vary across states; using these data generates a conservative estimate of asylum acceptances as only rejections are overturned. This division of IBCs reveals that, between 2009-2021, 55.4% can be considered "likely refugees," a proportion that rises to 75.5% at the peak of arrivals in 2015. With most IBCs representing forced migration flows considering the asylum policies implemented domestically within Europe, the use of data on border crossings as an objective measure of "illegal" migration is misplaced.

Overall, this analysis exposes how data can be – and are – deployed to further certain public narratives and thereby represent political constructions rather than objective truths. In the case of data on border-crossings collected by law enforcement agencies such as Frontex, narratives of "illegal" migration flows construct an understanding of border crossings as something which requires a securitized response – one that law enforcement bodies can provide. Alternative labelling such as "forced" migration would imply that humanitarian responses to migration flows would be more appropriate. Thus, it is imperative for news media, researchers, and all other public authorities to adopt a critical approach to data, questioning what they represent and what purpose they serve for those who collect and publish them.

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4 See https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/

Conclusion

While there is still hardly any data available for demographic flows, available EU-level indicators for irregular flows are generally of good quality, particularly with respect to accessibility and documentation. But there are, unsurprisingly, some limitations in terms of validity and reliability. In terms of external validity, the data available often only describe an aspect of the phenomenon of irregular migration instead of being representative of the whole (e.g., asylum data only capture status-related flows). Among others, there are also issues with double-counting[5] or missing data, particularly when disaggregating by age and sex, which pose a challenge to measurement precision. As for internal validity, it is difficult to independently assess since the data are generated by bureaucracies with limited oversight; the indicators used are cross-sectional and not linked in any way; and there are not many opportunities to cross-validate the numbers with other information. Eurostat and EU Agencies work hard to harmonise data collection among member states, but currently, limitations continue to be evident, particularly with regard to double- or under-counting, geographical and temporal comparability (including time lags), and finally, interoperability across EU systems.

Good quality data are essential for effective migration governance. On the one hand, it can be in the best interests of irregular migrants to be counted, particularly if they need protection. However, the same data can also be used for the enforcement of migration legislation, including apprehension, detention, or deportation. As such, the interest in enhancing data collection on irregular migration and generating estimates must be carefully weighed against privacy considerations and societal interests. This balance is crucial so as not to impede trust on the part of irregular migrants and hinder the public service mission of providers or support groups, civil servants, and other street-level bureaucrats who regularly come into contact with them. In view of these, we recommend the following main ways forward to advance research on irregular migration flows and to prevent misuse of migration data:

- Define irregularity well and, when needed, be clear about different types of irregularity;
- Continue improving data quality for (selected) flow indicators, for example, by investing more resources into quality checks and making cohort data across multiple indicators available (without compromising privacy considerations);
- Acknowledge that supplemental qualitative information is essential for the validation and triangulation of quantitative data; incorporating qualitative studies[6] into the collection of migration data should be the norm; and finally,
- Consider using accessible informational resources, such as educational videos, to mitigate the misuse of migration data for political purposes; knowing the importance of a fact-based discourse can help ensure that statistics on migrant populations are not manipulated or misrepresented to serve political agendas.

The salience and problematisation of irregular migration in policy and everyday discourse increase the risks associated with the use of irregular migration data for political purposes. The potential for misuse[7] cannot be underestimated – from the presentation of statistics to the utilisation of such statistics in political decisions and policymaking. Immigration, particularly irregular migration, has become a divisive, even polarising topic. As such, all the more is good quality data – accurate, frequent and timely – of critical importance.

5 For example, if an individual attempts to cross the border multiple times within a short period, each attempt is likely recorded as a separate incident. There is also potential double counting between indicators as one person might generate a detection at one border, then an application for asylum, then a withdrawal, then another detection at another border, another asylum application, a Dublin hit, a negative asylum decision etc. All these data concerning one individual may be recorded within a year on Eurostat.

6 For example, conducting anonymous interviews with irregular migrants themselves and collecting testimonies that describe their situations and intentions in more detail rather than relying solely on a simple counting exercise.

7 See for example, ECRE. (2022). Asylum statistics and the need for protection in Europe: Updated Factsheet https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Asylum-statistics-and-the-need-for-protection-in-Europe-final.pdf. Also, Mouzourakis, M. (2014). 'Wrong number?' The Use and Misuse of Asylum Data in the European Union. https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/wrong-number-use-and-misuse-asylum-data-european-union/

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Box 8.2: Understanding asylum data in the context of irregular and regular migration

Teddy Wilkin and Petya Alexandrova

Data on asylum applications are used widely used as indicators of mixed migration to and within the EU+.[8] Yet interpreting these figures in relation to irregular and regular migration requires careful nuance. Many asylum seekers cross borders undetected, some enter legally, and others apply repeatedly in the same country or move between EU+ countries. This complexity creates challenges for measurement, interpretation and policy.

As of mid-2025, there were 1.3 million asylum applications in the EU+ still awaiting a final decision. This highlights the scale of people currently staying with unresolved legal status—many of whom may eventually find themselves in an irregular position if their claim is rejected. In 2024, EU+ countries issued around a third of a million negative asylum decisions. While some appeal such decisions, many abscond and remain without legal residence.

Visa policy provides a direct link between asylum and regular migration. In 2024, around a quarter of all asylum applications in the EU+ were lodged by persons originating from visa-exempt countries. Such persons can enter the EU for touristic reasons without needing to apply for visa. Many do so, and then claim asylum. Conversely, those from visa-obliged countries may apply for a visa and then arrive regularly and apply for asylum. The share of visa holders among asylum applicants is quite important in some EU+ countries.

However, irregular entry remains extremely important for asylum applications. EUAA estimates suggest that in 2024, detected illegal border-crossings by land and sea accounted for about 1 in 7 asylum applications overall, rising to a third of all asylum applications in frontline Member States. However, these only reflect actual detections at the border. Undetected irregular arrivals are, by definition, not counted—meaning any analysis based solely on detections risks underestimating the scale. This makes it even more important to triangulate asylum data with other sources.

Asylum applications can also reveal secondary movements—people applying sequentially in more than one EU+ country or applying in EU+ countries other than the one they initially entered. In 2024, nearly 150,000 decisions were issued in response to outgoing Dublin requests, which, we estimate, relates to about 14% of total applications. Such requests are made under the Dublin III Regulation which establishes which Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application. Most of these requests were for reasons related to secondary movements. Even persons with refugee status have been known to move and reapply elsewhere. Data from Eurodac, the EU's biometric database for asylum and irregular entry, provide additional insights. In 2023, there were more than 276,000 instances of asylum applications being linked to recent irregular border-crossings. Just over half applied for asylum in the same Member State where they were detected, while the rest applied for asylum in another Member State. These matches illustrate the link between irregular entry and asylum applications, but the Eurodac data have limitations including potential double counting, the exclusion of children under 14, and the lack of breakdowns by nationality.

Repeated asylum applications add another layer of complexity. According to eu-LISA,[9] only 55% of applications lodged in 2023 were first-time claims, indicating that nearly half of all applicants had already lodged previous asylum applications somewhere in the EU+. EUAA estimates suggest that nearly a tenth were individuals reapplying in the same EU+ country (in both 2023 and 2024), often after remaining in the country for an extended period—typically in an irregular or tolerated status.

8 EU+ = EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

9 E-LISA stands for the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT.

Asylum data can also reflect demographic patterns. Some applicants are children born in the EU+ to an asylum-seeking parent, in some cases making up more than 10% of all applicants. These figures reflect how status can persist intergenerationally without clear legal resolution.

Looking ahead, under the Interoperability Regulation, the Central Repository for Reporting and Statistics (CRRS), currently under development, is expected to deliver cross-system statistics that will significantly improve our understanding of these dynamics. It will enable anonymous tracking across databases and provide more precise insights into how individuals move through stages of irregular entry, legal stay, asylum and status withdrawal.

In short, asylum data provide a valuable but incomplete window into migration stocks. They reflect both regular and irregular situations but must be interpreted with care. Analysts should consider visa status, secondary movements, repeated applications and related demographic patterns. When triangulated with detections at the border, visa records, and Dublin statistics, asylum data help clarify not only the scale of irregular presence, but also how individuals engage with EU+ migration and protection frameworks.

Box 8.3: Understanding 4Mi data

Francesco Teo Ficcarello

What is 4Mi?

4Mi, developed by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), is an innovative and global data collection platform[10] that provides independent and in-depth insights into the experiences of migrants moving along mixed migration routes. Since 2014, 4Mi has become the world's largest globally comparable primary data collection system focused specifically on people on the move, with more than 130,000 interviews conducted in over 30 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

Rationale and scope

4Mi was created to fill a major evidence gap around the realities faced by migrants and refugees in transit—populations often invisible in traditional migration statistics due to their irregular or non-camp-based status. The initiative contributes directly to the Global Compact for Migration's Objective 1 by providing accurate and disaggregated data for informed policy-making.

Methodology

Data are collected through one-on-one, structured interviews using standardized yet adaptable survey tools, administered by a large network community-based enumerators (approx. 130 as of 2025), most of whom are migrants or refugees themselves. These enumerators are embedded in local contexts, ensuring high trust and access to hard-to-reach groups. In countries where MMC is not established, data are collected through local partners rooted in the countries. Surveys are quantitative, enabling statistically robust analysis, but also include open-ended questions to capture personal narratives. Sampling is purposive, with enumerators operating in migration hubs identified through scoping and mapping exercises. While not statistically representative, the data are highly indicative, enabling rich, contextual understanding of profiles, drivers, journeys,, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of people on the move.

10 See https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-faq/

Tools and flexibility

The model is flexible, allowing for add-ons on topics such as youth migration, climate mobility, and urban integration. Innovations include longitudinal follow-ups, remote data collection, and interactive dashboards for public data exploration. This flexibility was key to rapidly launching Covid-19-specific modules, through which 25,500 interviews were conducted in 2020 alone.

Data use and outputs

4Mi data feed into MMC's research publications,[11] interactive dashboards[12] and presentations towards evidence-based programming and policy-making. The data are also shared with partners such as UN agencies and NGOs under data-sharing agreements. Outputs include statistical analyses in the form of research reports, briefing papers, snapshots, infographics and policy briefings, as well as real-time response tools for humanitarian actors.

A unique complement to flow data

By providing in-depth, qualitative insights into the human dimension of migration, 4Mi complements other data collection and flow monitoring systems (e.g., IOM's DTM), which focus more on volumes. 4Mi captures lived experiences, decisions, and risks in a globally comparable format, enabling cross-regional and route-based analysis. Its integration of quantitative scale with qualitative depth ensures that the perspectives of (irregular) migrants—often missing from mainstream migration discourse—are not only heard but systematically analyzed. In doing so, 4Mi plays a vital role in providing an evidence base for the development of more humane, inclusive, and responsive migration policy and practice worldwide.[13]

11 See https://mixedmigration.org/resources/

12 See https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/

13 More information on 4Mi can be found at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/4Mi-Introduction.pdf