

Chapter 12

Progress, limits, and the need for sustained effort

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Irregular migration remains one of the most politically salient and technically challenging areas of migration data and policy in Europe. A range of stakeholders from academia to NGOs to government ministries collect and analyse data on irregular migration and are actively improving upon the evidence base in important respects. Still, quantitative information on irregular migration remains marked by significant gaps, inconsistencies, and contested interpretations. Too often, service provision, public discourse and decisions on migration management are made with reference to numbers that are partial, outdated, or biased, and presented without clear explanation of their scope and limitations. These problems persist in part because there is no European body tasked with sustaining cooperation, building capacity, or coordinating knowledge on irregular migration data. Overcoming this gap is essential if progress is to become cumulative rather than fragmented and short-lived.

Many of the implications set out in this Handbook will be familiar to those who have worked on improving statistics on irregular migration – or migration more generally – for years. Calls for clearer concepts, more robust quality assessments, scalable methodologies, greater transparency, stronger ethical safeguards, and closer alignment between data producers and users are not new. Yet to say there has been no change would overlook the progress of recent years. Across Europe, there is growing use of administrative registers to capture aspects of irregular migration and produce publicly available analysis; greater openness to innovative estimation methods; more ambitious and thoughtful surveys to boost coverage of hard-

to-reach populations; and increased awareness of the importance of trust-based engagement.

The examples featured in this Handbook illustrate that such progress is possible and can be sustained. Spain's *padrón* system continues to register all residents regardless of status, enabling both service provision and valuable local-level statistics. The United Kingdom's Home Office publishes regular operational statistics and analysis on irregular arrivals and enforcement activity, providing an accessible view of specific flow indicators. Austria's Austrian Micro Data Centre offers a model for privacy-compliant linkage of administrative datasets to support longitudinal analysis. Italy's Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity (ORIM) survey in Lombardy demonstrates how inclusive, community-engaged data collection can be maintained over decades. The Mixed Migration Centre's global 4Mi survey shows how community-based enumerators can gather detailed information from people on the move at a global scale.

Various innovative methods have worked well in specific settings. In some places, promising approaches remain at the pilot level, dependent on individual champions, short-term funding, or local conditions unlikely to be replicable elsewhere. We also recognise that many of the implications set out in this Handbook are necessarily broad. We resist detailed prescription because context matters: initiatives need to be adapted to local legal frameworks, institutional arrangements and operational realities, drawing on the expertise of those who work closest to the data and the communities the data concern. There is a balance

to strike. Too much rigidity makes it difficult for a concept or method to travel; too much generality reduces its practical value. The case studies in this Handbook, particularly the innovative estimation methods and data-collection practices, are intended to provide concrete examples that, while rooted in specific contexts, are well suited to adaptation – if not immediately, then over time – into other settings.

Notwithstanding this need for techniques to be context-appropriate, it is clear that one thing which could help maintain and grow this body of innovation would be more coordination at the European level. The work documented in this Handbook sits within a longer trajectory of European and international efforts to improve irregular migration data. Earlier initiatives – in particular the CLANDESTINO project, which ended in 2009¹ – laid the groundwork for this Handbook and many of the good practices highlighted in it. While the past 15 years have seen new innovations and pilots, the lack of a consistent, Europe-wide mechanism for maintaining and building on these advances has limited their cumulative impact. A sustained, coordinated investment over that period would have undoubtedly produced a more harmonised, institutionalised, and widely adopted set of approaches across the continent.²

Such coordination would need to be mindful of ethical considerations. Techniques such as probabilistic matching of administrative records, capture–recapture analysis, mixed-method survey designs, and the integration of digital trace data have broad applicability when adapted with care.

Local and municipal practices that build trust, such as the inclusivity of Spain's *padrón* regardless of migration status or the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity's (ORIM) use of cultural mediators, show that the findings from integration research can go hand in hand with data quality. These case studies also underscore a broader point: effective irregular migration data systems are as much about relationships, governance, and institutional trust as they are about statistical methods.

Looking ahead, one of the hopes for this Handbook is that it will help to spur greater Europe-wide coordination on irregular migration data. This should take place under the leadership of key stakeholders, such as Eurostat, the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs of the European Commission (DG Home), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and the EU Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA). This type of leadership, coupled with long-term funding, would go a long way to ensuring that improvements in irregular migration data are sustained rather than episodic. This should include knowledge exchange and technical cooperation between researchers, NSOs, ministries and international organisations from different countries.

Irregular migration will never be fully knowable. Uncertainty is inherent in a phenomenon shaped by mobility, with strong incentives to remain “under the radar,” and prone to shifting policies

1 See <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/44103>. Results are also available from the archived project website at <https://www.uni-bremen.de/fb12/irregular-migration-1>.

2 The CLANDESTINO team sought additional funding from the European Commission, proposing a cooperation with the European Migration Network to undertake regular updates of the CLANDESTINO database and undertake related analyses, but their attempt was unsuccessful.

and legal frameworks. More information does not automatically reduce uncertainty or lead to greater insights. In some cases, an abundance of data can be more damaging than a scarcity of information, fuelling misinterpretation, selective use, or misplaced confidence in the numbers. The aim is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to manage it, grounding policy and public debate in evidence that is as reliable, transparent, and context-aware as possible.

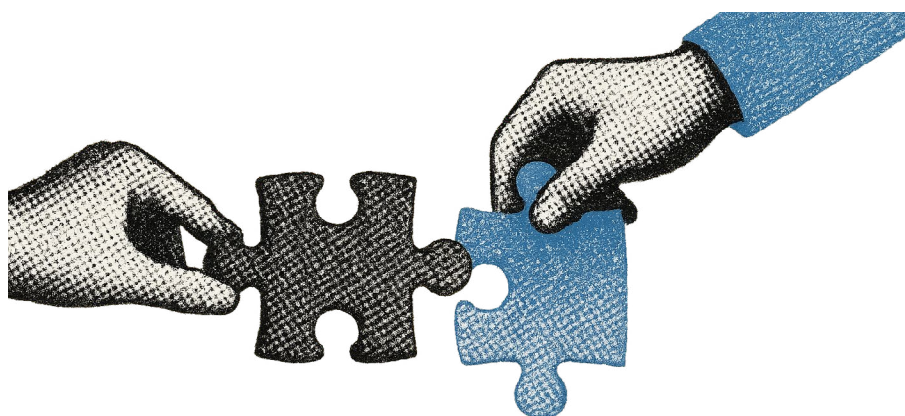
The examples and approaches in this Handbook show that there is significant potential in

activities already under way, that better data are achievable, and that their careful use can strengthen both understanding and governance of irregular migration. The challenge is to move from promising but isolated or short-lived initiatives towards a Europe-wide infrastructure for irregular migration data that is durable, well-resourced and collaborative. This will not be achieved quickly, but the building blocks already exist, providing a foundation for longerterm investment in more informed, transparent and credible data on irregular migration.





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