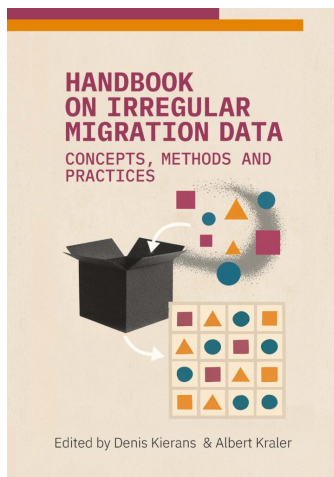




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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

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Irregular migration is a persistent feature of mobility to and within Europe, yet the evidence base remains fragmented, inconsistent, and often misunderstood. The very notion of ‘irregular migration’ is vague, ambiguous, and ultimately a legal and policy category that requires careful, context-sensitive interpretation. This Handbook distils lessons from the Measuring Irregular Migration (MirreM) project and contributions from colleagues in research, government, and civil society. Focused on Europe, it offers practical guidance on how to compile, interpret, and use irregular migration data, bringing together conceptual clarifications,

ethical safeguards, methodological advances, and examples of good practice.

This Handbook is intended for policymakers, statisticians, journalists, researchers, and practitioners. It can be used to: understand the current state of knowledge; recognise opportunities and pitfalls when working with data; identify promising approaches for producing estimates; learn from practical examples; and inform strategies for improving responsible use of data in policymaking.

Concepts and definitions

Conceptual clarity is essential because definitions shape what is measured and compared. Irregular migration is not a fixed fact but a policy category that varies across countries and over time.

- In this Handbook, ‘irregular migration’ refers to the phenomenon, ‘irregular migrants’ to people in that situation, and ‘migrant irregularity’ to the condition of lacking legal status under national law. Because definitions differ, comparability is limited.
- Terms such as ‘illegal’, ‘undocumented’, and ‘irregular’ carry connotations that shape perceptions and policies. The Mixed Migration Centre shows that rigid categories like asylum seeker or economic migrant often fail to capture overlapping motivations and vulnerabilities.
- The MirreM taxonomy distinguishes irregularity as a subset of precarious immigration status and separates pathways into and out of irregularity from stocks and flows. For example, asylum seekers may enter a country irregularly but gain a legal right to stay once granted protection.
- The taxonomy also captures how individuals’ legal status changes over time as they move into, through, and out of irregularity.
- Definitional choices shape what is visible in data and policy debates. The IOM Missing Migrants Project, for instance, records deaths in transit, highlighting border risks while not capturing deaths linked to irregular status after arrival.

Ethics and trust

Irregular migration data often concern vulnerable people whose rights and safety can be affected by how data are collected and used. Ethical safeguards and trust-building are essential to mitigating risks to individuals and groups and improving data quality.

- Safeguards need to go beyond GDPR compliance to avoid reinforcing stigma, fuelling harmful narratives, or deterring service use. Spain's municipal population register (*padrón*) is an example – it improves trust and service access while generating reliable local data.
- Privacy-compliant data linkage can be achieved, as shown by Austria's Austrian Micro Data Centre, which connects administrative datasets for longitudinal analysis without

exposing personal identities.

- Trusted enumerator models such as the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi survey, based on community-based data collection across more than 30 countries, can reach migrants in transit and destination contexts often missed by other surveys.
- Innovative recruitment strategies are demonstrated by Germany's Migrationsmuster nach Ablehnung im Asylverfahren (MIMAP) survey, which combines ethnography with app-based respondent-driven sampling to reach rejected asylum seekers. Findings suggest that family ties and work opportunities often influence onward migration more than enforcement pressure.

Estimates and indicators

Estimates provide critical context for policy debates, but their quality, scope, and timeliness vary. Indicators help track aspects of irregular migration, but they are partial and need careful interpretation.

- Between 2016 and 2023, an estimated 2.6 to 3.2 million irregular migrants are thought to have lived in 12 European countries (including the UK). This represents less than 1% of the total population and between 8% and 10% of the non-EU-born population.
- No clear change since 2008 can be detected in the overall size or share of the irregular migrant population across these countries.
- National variation is significant: compared to 2008, estimates appear to have increased in Austria, Germany, and Spain; remained stable in Belgium, France, Italy, the UK, and

the United States; and declined in Finland, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Poland.

- Flow estimates remain scarce, limiting the ability to track short-term changes or assess the impact of policy shifts.
- Even imperfect figures can be useful if their limitations are understood. MirreM's quality assessment framework offers a way to judge whether an estimate is fit for purpose, while triangulation across indicators helps to verify trends and detect anomalies.
- Linking border apprehensions and asylum decisions shows that 55.4% of apprehensions at EU external borders between 2009 and 2021 concerned people likely to be recognised as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

Innovative data sources and approaches

New methods, digital traces, and register data are expanding the evidence base on irregular migration. They can provide fresh insights but require validation, and in most cases complement rather than replace traditional sources.

- Linking unconventional sources can reveal hidden populations. For example, mortality data in Belgium have been used to estimate the irregular migrant population, and matching consular registers with national records in the United States has shown under-registration of foreign nationals.
- Online search analysis can track migration-related search terms, providing near real-time insight into migration intentions, though these do not always translate into actual movements.
- Germany's Central Register of Foreigners provides longitudinal data on residence histories and status changes, offering insight into pathways out of irregularity such as voluntary or forced return and regularisation.
- Italy's "Signs of Life" approach triangulates tax, school, and utility data to detect likely irregular residence, showing the potential of combining sources.
- In Chile, census data are integrated with administrative data on irregular entry, stay, and student enrolment – an estimation method with potential scalability.
- Informal work remains a blind spot, though Labour Force Surveys and others can be adapted to generate plausible estimates at relatively low cost across contexts.

From data to policy

High-quality data do not automatically translate into better policymaking. Uptake depends on trust, accessibility, and the willingness of policymakers to engage with evidence.

- Policymakers often hesitate to use irregular migration data, seeing it as partial, uncertain, or politically contested. In some contexts this reflects methodological caution, in others it allows symbolic measures to take precedence over substantive policymaking.
- MirreM presents a framework for improving uptake by harmonising definitions, providing clear documentation, producing user-friendly outputs, building capacity among policymakers, and establishing trusted data-sharing arrangements.
- Examples of effective use include: UK Home Office operational statistics, which provide regular figures with clear guidance; the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which uses research collaborations to analyse migrants' living situations; Italy's Regional Observatory on Integration and Multi-ethnicity (ORIM), whose survey outputs inform local integration and labour market policies; and the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi dashboards, which provide accessible data on migrant journeys.

Conclusion

This Handbook brings together concepts, findings, methods, and case studies with the aim of offering a clear, practical understanding of irregular migration data. It shows that definitions are being refined, methodologies are advancing, national statistical offices are increasingly engaged, and collaboration between them and researchers is expanding. Ethical considerations are gaining prominence, with more attention to safeguarding rights and preventing misuse. At the European level, Eurostat provides a basis for more systematic reporting, offering a pathway to greater harmonisation and comparability.

Irregular migration will never be fully knowable. Uncertainty is inherent in a phenomenon shaped by mobility, strong incentives to remain “under the radar,” and shifting legal and policy frameworks. The aim is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to manage it responsibly, grounding policy and debate in evidence that is as reliable, transparent, and context-aware as possible.

The building blocks for better irregular migration data are already in place. The task now is to connect them, embed them in sustained systems, and invest in their long-term development. This requires leadership at the European level, notably from Eurostat, the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs of the European Commission (DG Home) relevant agencies of the European Union, specifically the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), and the EU Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems (eu-LISA), working with national statistical offices, ministries, researchers, and international organisations.

With such coordination, knowledge exchange, and long-term funding, improvements in irregular migration data can be sustained rather than episodic, supporting more informed and credible policymaking.