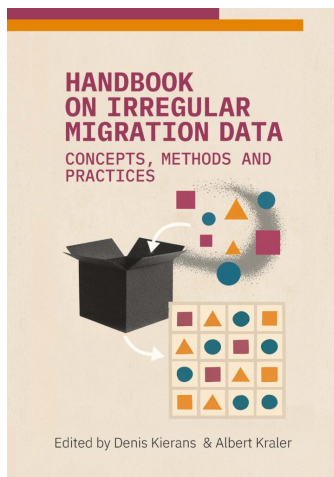




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Foreword

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Foreword

Frank Laczko

What is the scale of irregular migration across Europe? What have been the recent trends in irregular migration? How good are the data on irregular migration? What data are needed to improve our understanding of irregular migration? These are some of the key questions addressed in this new book based on research conducted in 20 countries in Europe and North America.

Irregular migration is a topic which receives a vast amount of policy, media and public attention. Yet reliable, timely and comparable data on the subject are often hard to find. Even when data are available, they may be misinterpreted and misused by policymakers and the media who do not understand fully how migration statistics are produced. There is a lack of guidance on how best to measure irregular migration.

In response to this challenge, the European Commission launched the MIRreM project in 2022 to strengthen the understanding and use of irregular migration data across Europe. The aim of the project is not just to produce more data, but to support more informed and transparent policy conversations, helping to ensure that decisions reflect evidence, not assumptions. This Handbook is one of the key outputs of this project.

The Handbook provides a user-friendly resource for navigating irregular migration data – highlighting what is available, how to interpret it, and where the limits lie. It speaks to policymakers, journalists, researchers, and advocates for those who want to use data more responsibly and effectively in a domain often dominated by uncertainty and speculation.

Irregular migration intersects with border management, asylum systems, labour markets, and social integration. Yet the data underpinning these discussions are often patchy, politicised, or poorly understood. This book provides tools to critically assess available estimates and encourages a more nuanced debate around what irregular migration numbers can (and cannot) tell us.

This Handbook builds directly on the CLANDESTINO project (2007-2009), which offered one of the first systematic attempts to estimate irregular migration in Europe. One of the key headline figures from the MIRreM project is the estimate that there were between 2.6 million and 3.2 million irregular migrants living in 12 European countries over the period 2016-2023. However, the quality of data on irregular migration in many countries is poor or outdated. Indeed, 5 countries studied by MIRreM have not produced any estimates in



recent years. Countries also tend to collect data on irregular migration in very different ways making comparisons difficult.

This Handbook offers guidance on how to interpret statistics on irregular migration. It offers a framework for navigating complexity rather than eliminating it – recognising that some uncertainty is inevitable, but that it can still be managed thoughtfully. The book clarifies complex concepts and the technical aspects of irregular migration data. Examples of data innovation are highlighted in the book and there is a discussion of the potential of using non-traditional sources of data to understand irregular migration trends. The book provides examples of insights gained from analysing data produced by the private sector and through the analysis of social media data. The Handbook provides examples of how irregular migration data are used in practice – from policymaking to service provision – helping to anchor abstract concepts in the real world. The book suggests practical tools for interpreting irregular migration data, supporting more informed and responsible use of estimates and indicators. The book frames data as a process, not just a product, drawing attention to how data are shaped by legal categories, institutional priorities, methodological decisions, and real-world constraints.

What comes next?

This publication is a step forward, not the destination. The long-term goal is to foster a more integrated and strategic approach to irregular migration data – one that combines the rigour of official statistics with the innovation of alternative data sources. The MirreM project has taken important steps in this direction, but sustained progress will require ongoing collaboration across governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector – particularly in Europe, where MirreM found irregular migration data especially uneven. It is hoped that this Handbook will serve as a contribution for that continued work.

