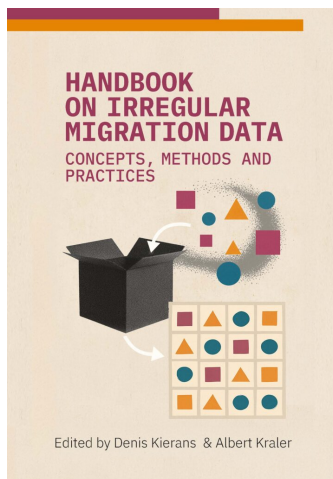




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Preface

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Preface

Albert Kraler and Denis Kierans

The aim of this Handbook is to provide critical guidance on quantitative measures of irregular migration, with a focus on Europe. Irregular migration is a phenomenon conceptualised in different ways, and that involves a partly hidden and therefore hard-to-count population. Quantifying it involves greater uncertainty and requires more careful interpretation and contextualisation than many other areas of migration statistics.

A central challenge is that the very notion of 'irregular migration' is vague and ambiguous. It is not an 'objective fact', but ultimately a time-bound legal and policy category – a 'social fact', created by human convention (Searle, 2011). The category is closely tied to modern states' role in controlling, shaping and categorising different forms of human mobility.

As a result, irregular migration is difficult to pin down for two key reasons. First, people in an irregular situation are a 'hard-to-reach' and often hidden population. Although, as this Handbook shows, many are in fact captured by official data, they nonetheless remain a 'hard-to-count' group. Second, the categories used to describe migrants in an irregular situation – or more broadly, migrants with a precarious residence status – are themselves contested. They are disputed not only politically and socially, but also in administrative and legal practice.

Who counts as having crossed a border irregularly, or as unlawfully staying within a given territory, is not a straightforward question. The answer depends on complex assessments made by states and other actors, each with their own interests in shaping how the term and its consequences are defined.

The difficulty of measuring irregular migration is therefore at least twofold. First, it is a conceptual and epistemological challenge. What exactly is being measured? On what bases are categories defined? And, not least of all, what types of knowledge shape what is being measured?

Second, it is a methodological challenge. How can particular conceptualisations of irregular migration be measured, especially when direct observation is not possible? What approaches are available to estimate different aspects of irregular migration, depending on the context and data sources? And to what extent can existing statistical indicators tell us something meaningful about its scale and dynamics?

Yet despite these challenges, the key message of this Handbook is that it is possible to make scientifically sound statements about the quantitative dimensions of irregular migration, and to tackle the conceptual, epistemological and methodological issues it presents. This requires efforts from all those involved in producing, using and disseminating these data. In particular, it depends on bridging the gap between conceptual debates, the practical demands of measurement, and the policy decisions that shape and are shaped by them.

The aim of this Handbook is to support that process. It does so through a series of focussed chapters, complemented by short textboxes that illustrate concrete examples of practice. Taken together, these contributions set out practical options for addressing the quantitative dimensions of irregular migration, while acknowledging the limitations and uncertainties that inevitably remain.

The idea behind the Handbook

This Handbook was developed as part of the Horizon Europe Project “Measuring Irregular Migration and Related Policies” (MirreM)¹. It is one of two Handbooks produced by the project, the other focusing on regularisation policies (Ahrens et al. 2025).

Both of the MirreM Handbooks were inspired by earlier guidance produced by the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness statistics (EGRIS)²: one on refugee statistics and another on statistics on internally displaced persons (European Commission and Eurostat, 2018; European Commission, Statistical Office of the European Union and United Nations Organisation, 2020). The EGRIS Handbooks were eventually drafted by a core writing team at the secretariat, but were the product of a multi-year process, drawing on a group that included experts from national statistical offices, international organisations and Eurostat, as well as a range of independent experts.

Taking inspiration from this approach, MirreM envisaged two working groups: one on irregular migration data and another on regularisation. Each was to involve a core of committed members from relevant organisations, supported by a broader network of stakeholders who would provide guidance along the way. In practice, however, it proved more productive to work on this Handbook with different expert communities at different points in the project. Rather than creating standing working groups, we engaged partners flexibly, working more closely with them when collaboration was most practical and productive.

Stakeholders consulted included academics developing methodologies and approaches to measuring irregular migration, as well as those critically engaging with categorisations and quantitative measurements. Civil society organisations and International Organisations contributed important insights from research and the field. National Statistical Offices (NSOs) played a significant role throughout the MirreM project, reflecting their role in producing population estimates that account for the entire resident population, including irregular migrants. Immigration authorities and their affiliated research centres took part, drawing on their operational knowledge and expertise in migration data analysis.

Engagement at the European level was key, given the role of EU institutions in shaping migration policy and data collection and use. It included Eurostat, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission and its Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography (KCMD)³, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) as well as individual experts from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home).

These stakeholders were involved in MirreM’s work from the outset, including through a series of workshops with national and local stakeholders in partner countries and several workshops at the European level.

1 More information on the project, including all its publications is available at www.irregularmigration.eu.

2 <https://egrisstats.org>

3 The Joint Research Centre embarked on a related project on measuring the effectiveness of return policy, drawing also on insights from MirreM (Belmonte et al. 2025).

Concrete work on this Handbook began with a workshop in Brussels in April 2024, which brought together around 50 stakeholders to discuss and refine the concept. Exchanges continued through 2024 and 2025, including at the 2024 IMISCOE conference and the 2025 International Forum for International Migration Statistics in Malmö. They also included consultations with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)'s statistical division and task forces under the Conference of European Statisticians (CES), Eurostat's task force on implementation of guidelines for a harmonised population base.

For this Handbook, the MirreM team reached out to a wide range of experts to contribute chapters and

textboxes. The strong response to these invitations reflects, we hope, a shared commitment to advancing discussions on the quantitative aspects of irregular migration, and to linking what is possible in practice with policy and decision-making.

The remainder of this Handbook is structured into twelve core chapters, complemented by a Foreword, an Executive Summary, and a series of thematic textboxes. It moves from definitional and ethical questions to methodological approaches and practical applications, offering researchers, policymakers, and practitioners a practical resource for navigating one of the most complex and politically sensitive areas of migration data.

Below is a brief overview of the Handbook by section:

Chapter 1: Introduction – Making the case for better data on irregular migration

Introduces the motivation behind the Handbook, describing common problems in how irregular migration is defined, counted, and debated, and setting out the case for a more structured and reflective approach to data.

Chapter 2: What is irregular migration?

Explores legal and administrative definitions of irregularity and presents the MirreM taxonomy as a tool to differentiate between forms of irregular migration across stocks and flows.

Chapter 3: Ethics and Data on Irregular Migration

Examines the ethical risks associated with collecting and using data on irregular migration and proposes safeguards to reduce harm, ensure accountability, and promote responsible data practices.

Chapter 4: What are good quality data on a phenomenon that is hard to measure?

Defines what quality means in the context of irregular migration data and introduces MirreM's assessment framework, focussed on transparency, accessibility, comparability, and the handling of uncertainty.

Chapter 5: Innovations in methodological approaches to estimate irregular migrant stocks and flows

Reviews key methods for estimating irregular migrant populations, including their assumptions, strengths, and limitations, and offers guidance on when and how each can be applied.

Chapter 6: Data Traces and the Inevitable Visibility of Irregular Migration

Analyses how irregular migrants appear in conventional and alternative data sources, challenging the assumption of invisibility and highlighting how visibility is shaped by institutional and legal contexts.

Chapter 7: Register data sources on migrant stocks

Assesses how administrative registers, such as Germany's AZR and Spain's padrón, can help derive indicators of irregular residence, while also noting gaps, biases, and data quality challenges.

Chapter 8: Getting into the flow - what do we know now, 15 years since CLANDESTINO?

This chapter takes stock of how irregular migration flows are measured, noting changes over time in the availability and accessibility of flow indicators, particularly at EU level, but also persistent challenges related to validity, scope, and interpretation.

Chapter 9: Irregular migration and informal work

Proposes a method to estimate the overlap between irregular residence and informal employment using labour force survey data.

Chapter 10: Surveying irregular migrants: challenges and approaches

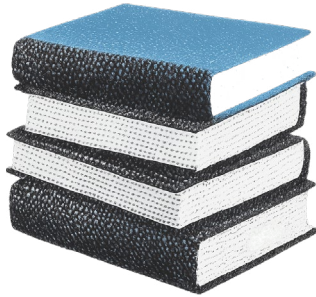
Reviews strategies for including irregular migrants in survey research, including regularisation surveys, retrospective trajectory data, and targeted sampling approaches.

Chapter 11: Towards the More Effective Use of Irregular Migration Data

Explores how institutional, legal, and political factors shape the use of irregular migration data, identifying key barriers to uptake.

Chapter 12: Progress, limits, and the need for sustained effort

Summarises the Handbook's core insights and outlines practical steps to improve the production, interpretation and application of irregular migration data across Europe.



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