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## Box 1.1: A history of interest: Irregular migration data in Europe

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response to the presence (or perceived presence) of irregular migrants in a specific area.

When data are used in these debates, it matters not just whether they are accurate, but whether they are well understood and used appropriately. As discussed in Chapter 11, the responsible use of migration data depends as much on interpretation and communication as on technical quality. This Handbook is intended to support both: offering tools for better measurement and clearer thinking about what these numbers do and do not tell us.

In short, the production of these data and their use in different types of debates are here to stay. We hope this Handbook brings clarity to some of these recurring policy, operational and social challenges. Many of the technical problems that emerge in this area – e.g., small populations, partial visibility, reliance on administrative proxy data instead of or in addition to traditional data sources – are shared by those working on other ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. As such, the insights offered here may also be relevant to researchers and practitioners working in related areas.

### **Box 1.1: A history of interest: Irregular migration data in Europe**

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Irregular migration has been an issue of high salience in Europe since at least the 1990s, when migration flows to Western Europe surged following the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the displacement following the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. Beyond these major turning points, the primary receiving countries in Europe had already experienced a longer-standing increase in asylum-related inflows from beyond Europe, traditionally the main source of refugees in Europe. At the same time, legal migration increased considerably, facilitated in Europe by freedom of movement policies in the European Union and the Eastern enlargement. These developments fuelled a broader interest in migration, which in turn led to increased efforts to improve migration statistics at the national, European-wide and global levels (Kraler, Reichel, & Entzinger, 2015).

The political interest in irregular migration also went hand-in-hand with more systematic administrative data collection, such as on apprehensions, smuggling and deportation. At the European level, the first such effort was the Centre for Information, Discussion and Exchange on the Crossing of Frontiers and Immigration (CIREFI) data collection initiative, launched in 1996 to support, and initially conducted on a confidential basis (See Kraler & Jandl, 2006). This formed the basis for the Enforcement of Immigration Legislation (EIL) Statistics collected by Eurostat under the 2007 Regulation on Migration Statistics. Yet there was also growing interest in irregular migrants who have not come into contact with state authorities, but constituted an important part of the migrant population – and workforce – especially in Southern EU Member States.

A study commissioned by the European Commission in 1991 appears to have been the first to examine the scale of the irregular migrant population in a European comparative perspective (Werth & Körth, 1991). Another study commissioned by Eurostat a few years later placed greater emphasis on conceptual and methodological aspects (Delaunay & Tapinos, 1998). In some ways, this laid the groundwork for the first systematic European effort to collect, assess and produce estimates for a larger number of European countries, and to elaborate an estimate of the overall irregular migrant population in the EU as a whole: the CLANDESTINO project (CLANDESTINO, 2009).

Building on this foundation, MirreM refines the CLANDESTINO methodology and adds important new elements. One is an exploration of innovative methods (Chapter 5). Another is a sustained effort to involve relevant stakeholders, raising awareness about the opportunities and limitations of data on irregular migration and encouraging more better practices in collecting, analysing and using these data.

Other recent initiatives address this issue as well. At the European level, negotiations on a new Regulation on Population and Housing Statistics have led to the creation of a “task force on implementation guidelines for a harmonised population base”, which considers irregular migrants alongside other hard-to-count groups. Under the Conference of European Statisticians (CES), hosted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), two further task forces – ‘Measuring Hard-to-Reach Groups in Administrative Sources’<sup>1</sup> and ‘Defining and Measuring New Forms of International Migration’<sup>2</sup> – have collected practices from NSOs on how to account for irregular migrants in population statistics, including methodological approaches (UNECE, 2025).

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**The second aim of this Handbook is to bring attention to the need for more high-quality European-focussed research on irregular migration data.** Indeed, there has been a relative neglect in Europe of the irregular migrant population by demographers in general and by

National Statistical Offices (NSOs) specifically.

While irregular migration data ‘suddenly were everywhere’<sup>3</sup>, irregular migrants as a population group and subject of demographic analysis are conspicuously absent from the statistical work of

1 <https://unece.org/statistics/documents/2023/11/working-documents/terms-reference-task-force-hard-reach-groups>

2 <https://unece.org/statistics/documents/2024/02/working-documents/task-force-defining-and-measuring-new-forms>

3 Paraphrasing Kathleen Newland’s (2010) observation on the ascendancy of migration as a key concern on the international level in the early 2000s.