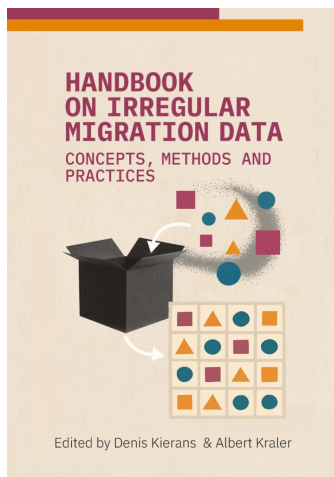




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Box 2.1: Words matter” Terms used to describe irregular migration

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Box 2.1: “Words matter”¹ – Terms used to describe irregular migration.*Albert Kraler*

A wide range of terms are used to speak about ‘irregular migration’. Until the 2010s, ‘illegal migration’ – and related terms such as ‘illegal migrant’ or ‘illegal alien’ (the latter predominantly used in the United States) – were the most widely used (Paspalanova, 2008). In years since, they have been criticised for their association with criminality and the harmful effects of these associations on migrants (PICUM, 2017). As far back as 1975, a UN General Assembly Resolution recommended that UN agencies instead use terms like ‘non-documented’ or ‘irregular migrant workers’, reflecting the focus at the time on labour migration. Similar language has been adopted in subsequent international fora.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo spoke of ‘undocumented or irregular migrants’, while the International Labour Conference and later the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) used terms such as ‘irregular status’ and ‘migrants in an irregular situation’ to draw attention to the legal dimension of status without stigmatising individuals (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2011). In 2009, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on EU institutions and Member States to stop using the term ‘illegal immigrants’, pointing to its negative connotations, and instead to refer to ‘irregular’ or ‘undocumented’ migrants or workers. Since then, the European Commission has started to use ‘irregular migration’, although ‘illegal migration’ is also still used. In legal contexts, the more precise term ‘unlawful entry and stay’ is used at the European level (European Migration Network 2025). Other language, such as ‘clandestine migration’, ‘clandestine migrants’, ‘unauthorised migration’ and ‘unauthorised migrants’ remain in circulation. Unlike most terms that either convey a negative or neutral connotation, the French term ‘sans papier’ (migrants without papers) has a pro-migrant and activist connotation, reflecting the lasting legacy of the French sans-papier movement of the 1990s (Freedman, 2008).

Researchers have drawn attention to a shift in media and academic discourse towards terms seen as more neutral, such as irregular, undocumented² or unauthorised – as opposed to clandestine or illegal (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022:192). Yet even these more neutral terms are contested. Their meanings and uses can shift over time, particularly when they become politicised. For this reason, it is important to use terms with care. While they may appear straightforward, their meanings are not fixed and can vary depending on the context and audience.

In this Handbook, ‘irregular migration’ or ‘irregular migrants’ are used, as the currently most widely used terms. Whilst considered the most neutral terms (cf. Squire 2010:4), their use still reproduces narratives that in themselves ‘irregularise’ and ‘other’ people defined as migrants. ‘Migrant irregularity’ is used when referring to the condition of lacking a legal status (cf. Chauvin Garcés-Mascareñas 2012 speaking of “migrant illegality” in a similar way). We recognize that migrant irregularity is not a fixed trait, but is produced by state driven processes, captured by the term ‘irregularisation’. We prefer the term ‘irregular migrant’ or ‘irregular migration’, as the Handbook is primarily concerned with the measurement of outcomes of processes of irregularisation. This said, we are also interested in processes, even in the more limited perspective of legal status trajectories, that is changes of legal status over time (see in particular chapter 7 and 10 for such perspectives).

1 “Words matter” was the motto of a campaign by the Platform for International Cooperation and Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) launched in 2010, see <https://picum.org/words-matter-2/>.

2 In the United Kingdom, for instance, the term ‘undocumented’ has come to be seen as appropriate in the context of the Windrush scandal, which involved people with a legal residence, but no documentation to prove it (The authors thank Peter Walsh for this observation).

Importantly, terms such as ‘irregular’, ‘illegal’ or ‘undocumented’ are not neutral descriptors. They are embedded in historical legacies of statecraft, border control, and postcolonial governance. The production of migration categories has often served to reify racialised boundaries of belonging and to legitimise differential access to rights. Even more ‘neutral’ alternatives, such as ‘undocumented’ must be used reflexively, acknowledging that terminology can both reflect and reproduce the hierarchies it seeks to name.

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We use the term here not to suggest it is an analytically clear category, or to affirm its supposed normative neutrality, but because of its widespread institutional use across statistical, legal, and public domains. Crucially, we do not treat irregularity as a fixed category. Rather, we understand it as a politically constructed condition, shaped by legal frameworks, administrative decisions, enforcement practices, and the broader discourses that surround migration.

Different actors invoke the term to refer to different things. Demographers may use it to denote

population segments not captured in official records. Lawyers focus on violations of entry or stay conditions. Policymakers and civil servants use it to delineate eligibility for return or regularisation programmes. Meanwhile, politicians and media figures often mobilise the term symbolically, to invoke crisis, disorder, or humanitarian need. These usages reflect not only different operational logics but also shifting political agendas. They reproduce the concept and narratives without necessarily clarifying or explaining the material realities of human mobility.