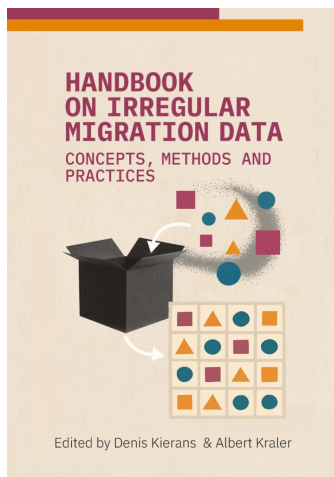




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## Box 2.2: Applying a mixed migration lens to irregular migration

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In line with such demographic framing, the IOM Glossary of Migration defines irregular migration as the “movement of persons to a new place of residence or transit that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries” (Sironi, Bauloz, & Emmanuel, 2019). But the term is also frequently used to describe the presence of migrants who have entered regularly and later lost their legal status, raising the question of where irregular movement ends and unauthorised residence begins. This distinction is far from trivial. When do “people on the move” cease to be on the move (Pijnenburg & Rijken, 2021)? Legal status further complicates the picture, especially when migrants’ status changes not as a result of movement, but due to administrative actions, procedural delays, or expiration of documentation.

Moreover, irregular movement itself does not automatically imply irregularity; conversely, lawful movement does not necessarily imply lawful stay. For example, migrants may enter a country on a visa or permit for work, study, or tourism, and later overstay or breach the conditions attached to their stay. Others may cross borders without authorisation but subsequently apply for asylum and be granted protection. In both cases, the boundaries between regular and irregular status are blurred.

The concept of mixed migration articulates this complexity in the context of asylum related migration (see Box 2.2 on mixed migration, below).

### **Box 2.2: Applying a mixed migration lens to irregular migration**

*Roberto Forin*

The term mixed migration emerged in the 1990s amid growing attention to the Migration-Asylum Nexus and was later adopted as a policy concept during the Global Consultations on International Protection launched by UNHCR in 2000. It was introduced to better capture the reality of overlapping refugee and migratory flows that defy clear-cut categorisation and often move along the same routes using similar means (Van Hear, 2011). These dynamics challenge states’ and mandated UN agencies capacity to apply distinct legal and policy responses and risk leaving people in mixed flows without adequate protection if they do not neatly fit into established legal categories.

#### **MMC definition of mixed migration**

According to the Mixed Migration Centre, mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people engaged in mixed migration have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Mixed migration describes migrants travelling along similar routes, using similar means of travel—often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.

#### **Why is a mixed migration lens useful for understanding irregular migration?**

The concept of mixed migration is essential for understanding the complexity of irregular and onward migration today, including in the European context. It highlights the reality that people rarely move for just one reason—such as war, economic reasons, or environmental stress—but for a combination of factors that are often intertwined. These motivations defy neat categorisation and reflect the complexity of contemporary mobility.

From a protection perspective, a mixed migration lens shows that regardless of their legal status—whether they are refugees, asylum seekers, or undocumented migrants—people on the move are forced to travel using irregular means and often face similar risks and vulnerabilities. These may include violence, exploitation, detention, and trafficking.

A mixed migration perspective also challenges simplistic distinctions between “forced” and “voluntary” migration. Not all people who are forced to move are entirely without agency, just as those who begin their journeys voluntarily may lose agency along the way. Recognising this continuum between choice and constraint helps us understand the lived realities of migration more fully.

Finally, while it is essential to fully acknowledge the specific rights of refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the mixed migration lens places equal emphasis on the rights and protection needs of all people on the move, regardless of status. This inclusive framing is vital for developing research, policies, and interventions that reflect the complex and evolving nature of contemporary mixed and irregular migration.

### References

Van Hear, N. (2011). Mixed Migration: Policy Challenges. Oxford: Migration Observatory. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/mixed-migration-policy-challenges/>

One way to approach these complexities is through the ‘population balance model’ also referred to as or ‘demographic accounts’ which distinguishes between in- and outflows and the resulting population stocks. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, this model provides a structured way to conceptualise how individuals move into and out of irregularity, whether through border crossings, overstays,

regularisations, or status loss. While inherently simplified and limited by the reproduction of problematic concepts this approach offers an important tool to expose complexities and to clarify the discussion: linking legal definitions, administrative data, and demographic analysis in a more coherent and transparent manner.

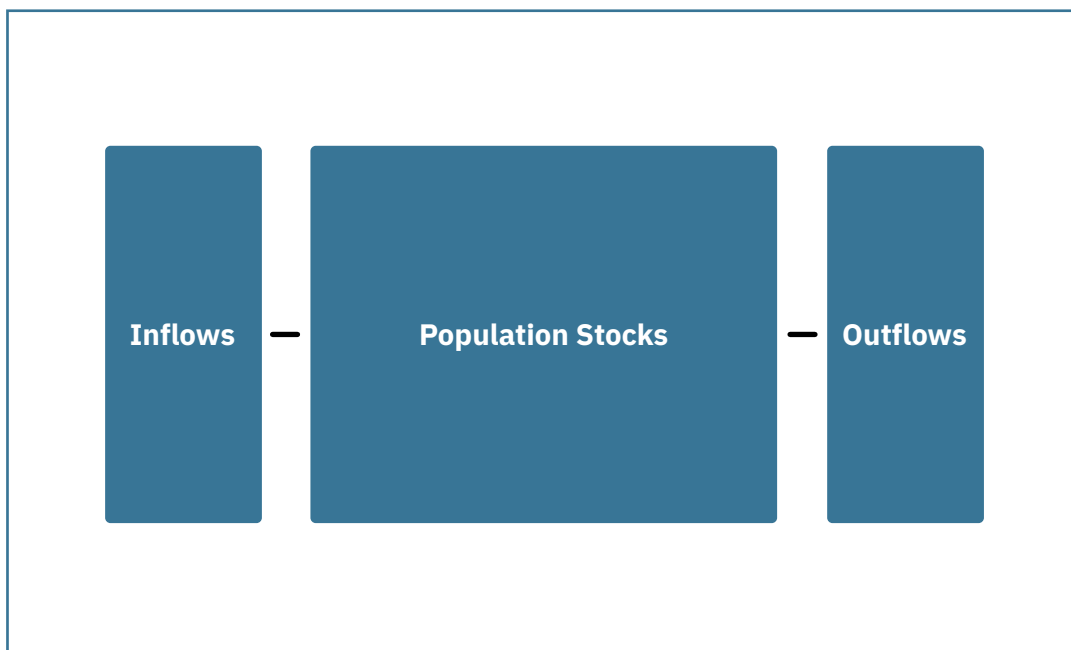


Figure 2.1: Population stocks and flows