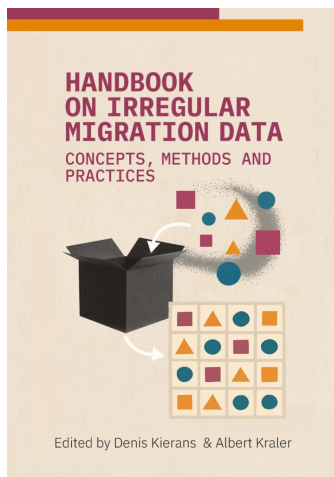




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## Box 2.3: Pathways in and out of irregularity

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Inflows increase population stocks while outflows decrease them. Importantly, a stock and flow perspective focuses on a particular territory (usually a country) and requires a precise definition of the population to be measured, which in turn dictates the flows that are to be considered (and those which are to be disregarded). Time is a key aspect here that determines when an inflow becomes part of the population stocks, or conversely, when an outflow is considered to reduce the stocks.<sup>4</sup> In the context of international migration, the conventional time criterion for long-term migration is one year (Kraler & Reichel, 2022), although many countries also include temporary migrants in their national population estimates, that is, migrants that have been staying for at least 3 months but less than a year. In relation to irregular migrants, their legal status adds another layer of complexity: Even if they need to be considered part of the resident population according to statistical conventions if they meet the residence requirements, they do not form part of the ‘de jure’ population – that is, [define ‘de jure’]. Change of legal status in turn constitutes also a specific type of flow, complementing natural population movements (births and deaths) and migration (in- and outmigration) as main pathways in and out of the population of migrants in an irregular situation.

Yet many of the regularly collected indicators on irregular migration lack any specification on duration of stay. In a similar vein, oft-used flow indicators record only events (such as a detected irregular border crossing), but do not link those events to a specific person in a given period of time. Both aspects make available measures problematic as measures of population dynamics and lead to higher uncertainty. In relation to irregular migrants, there are also different pathways (see Box 2.3) into irregularity, making an account of population movements even more complex. We will revert to this model of the ‘population balance’ in relation to irregular migrants further below. Suffice it to note here that flow indicators do not necessarily relate to stocks in this context, but even then the model of the population balance helps to clarify population dynamics and the type of robust statements that can – or cannot – be made.

### Box 2.3: Pathways in and out of irregularity

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Flows into and out of irregularity can also be conceptualised as pathways into and out of irregularity. This terminology moves away from a demographic conception and highlights the process of becoming, or ‘unbecoming’ irregular.

Individuals can become part of the population of migrants in an irregular situation by birth (a demographic flow), through irregular entry (a geographic flow), or by loss of a residence status, including (lawfully staying) asylum seekers, whose claim is rejected (a status-related flow). Similarly, individuals cease to be part of the population of migrants in an irregular situation by death (a demographic flow), outmigration (return or onward migration, both geographic flows) or by acquisition of another legal status, for example through regularisations (a status related flows).

The ‘population balance’ is a static concept: it allows for the definition of population stocks and in- and outflows within a given time period. Yet as scholarship on migrant irregularity has emphasized, irregularity is not a “static condition, but a dynamic space” in which the legal status is negotiated (rephrasing Chauvin Garcés-Mascareñas, 2012, 253 see also; Kraler & Ahrens, 2023, 21f). Other scholars have described migrant irregularity as ‘fluid’ (see for example Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020). This dynamic and ‘fluid’ nature can only be captured by explicitly considering legal status trajectories over time (cf. Beauchemin, Descamps, Dietrich-Ragon, 2023; Descamps, 2024; Goldring, 2022; Jasso et al., 2008, see also chapter 7). A trajectory perspective sheds light on changes of legal status over time, on pathways into and out of irregularity as well as repeated cycles of irregularity and how this is linked to (im)mobility, employment or housing trajectories, or indeed other aspects. A trajectory

<sup>4</sup> See the UN Recommendations on Statistics on International Migration and Temporary Mobility on using this framework for the collection of migration statistics more generally (United Nations Secretariat. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division 2025).