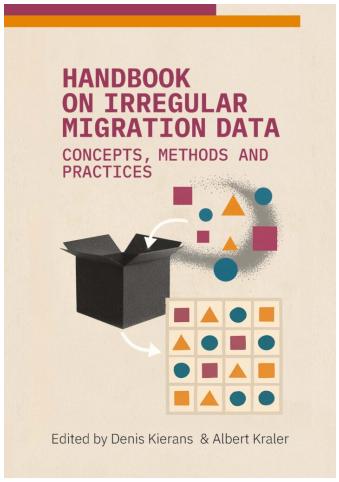

Textbox taken from D.Kierans & A.Kraler (eds), Handbook on Irregular Migration Data. Concepts, Methods and Practices. Krems: University of Krems Press

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Box 3.1 Making undocumented migrant children visible: A balanced approach to data collection, analysis and use

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(ALLEA, 2023, p.4) defines as:

- Reliability
- Honesty
- Respect
- Accountability.

Embedding these principles in research practice goes beyond the individual's responsibility, to include institutions and scholarly communities, and thus fostering a culture that prevents misconduct, and upholds public trust and promotes reflexive and risk-aware decision-making.

Professional standards in politically charged fields such as irregular migration include ensuring data quality, designing proportionate and privacy-conscious data collection, communicating findings with care, acknowledging others' contributions, and anticipating real-world consequences of research. In this context, transparent communication requires researchers to explicitly acknowledge uncertainty, document assumptions, and explain how findings should and should not be interpreted, rather than relying on vague claims of openness. Such an approach treats ethics not as a bureaucratic hurdle or checklist, but as an ongoing, reflexive practice shaping every stage of the data lifecycle. This is essential given the heightened risks of misuse, discrimination, and rights violations faced by irregular migrants, and the responsibility to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities through research (see Box 3.1, for the example of irregular migrant children).

Box 3.1: Making undocumented migrant children visible: A balanced approach to data collection, analysis and use

Marzia Rango, Naomi Lindt, Sebastian Palmas and Danzhen You

Collecting, producing and disseminating data and statistics on children who migrate without proper documentation or authorisation requires careful consideration. The lack of reliable data on migration that can be disaggregated by dimensions including age, sex and migratory status often renders this population statistically 'invisible', complicating efforts to uphold their most basic rights. However, if the generation of this evidence is not grounded in a child-sensitive, rights-based approach, undocumented migrant children can be potentially exposed to further rights violations, such as detention, deportation, family separation and human trafficking.

The well-being of undocumented migrant children is often undermined by their lack of legal status, particularly if they are unaccompanied or separated. The need to shed light on their deprivations and the risks they face, while also identifying and mitigating potential risks of harm that result from data collection, production and use must be thoughtfully balanced and informed by best practices (Sherr et al., 2025).

As enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the best interests of children must be prioritised in all data work. To guarantee that the process of evidence generation for children is truly ethical, some core principles need to be adhered to at all times: Benefit, "Do no harm," non-discrimination, respect, justice or fairness, integrity and accountability (Rahman and Keseru, 2021). In practice, this means designing and adopting an approach centred on children's rights, which ensures that children's views are heard and their dignity respected, all while maintaining strict confidentiality and data protection protocols. Data collectors must carefully consider which data are needed to adequately represent an undocumented migrant child's circumstances and how the data will be collected, stored and used. Building trust and providing a safe environment for children to share their experiences are also crucial (Graham et al., 2013).

In an attempt to operationalise these principles, UNICEF, in collaboration with The GovLab at New York University, launched the Responsible Data for Children (RD4C) initiative.[1] This framework provides a comprehensive set of principles to guide data handling throughout its entire lifecycle –

from collection and storage to analysis and use:

- Participatory: Involving and informing children, their caregivers, and communities in the data process.
- People-centric: Prioritizing the needs and expectations of children, their caregivers, and their communities.
- Prevention of harms: Assessing and mitigating risks at every stage of the data lifecycle.
- Professionally accountable: Establishing institutional processes and roles to ensure responsible data practices are implemented.
- Purpose-driven: Ensuring data is collected with a clear objective that benefits children.
- Protective of children's rights: Upholding the rights of the child throughout the data process.

Additional resources relevant to the ethical collection and production of data and on children in vulnerable situations – such as undocumented migrant children – include the UNHCR-UNICEF Guidance Note on Responsible Disaggregation of Data on Refugee Children (UNICEF and UNHCR, 2023), UNICEF e-course on Ethics in Evidence Generation,[2] the Compendium on Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham et al., 2013) and the report Researching Sensitive Topics Involving Children (Sherr et al., 2025). A series of reports also address the ethical dimension of the use of new technologies and novel data sources for evidence generation for children (Berman and Albright, 2017; Berman et al., 2018a; Berman et al., 2018b; Rahman and Keseru, 2021).

The International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) was launched in 2020 as a direct response to the need for better data on children on the move, particularly those who are the most vulnerable. More about IDAC, its mandate, events and resources are available at dataforchildrenonthemove.org.

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1 See https://rd4c.org/.

2 See https://agora.unicef.org/course/info.php?id=33813.

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Ethics risks in data collection and use

Intrusive practices and group privacy

Collecting data about people in irregular situations carries significant risks of harm, especially through intrusive or disproportionate data processing. Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), personal data includes any information that can identify a person, requiring careful control over collection, storage, use, sharing, and deletion (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). Strict enforcement of GDPR compliance means that: personal data will not be shared with third parties, informed consent is mandatory, and any sharing within the project (e.g. for associated researchers or external colleagues) will follow carefully regulated agreements.

Yet, compliance with formal data protection law is only the starting point. Ethical research must also consider 'group privacy' (Floridi et al., 2018). Even anonymised and aggregated big data can enable profiling, reinforcing existing surveillance and discrimination. For migrants in an irregular situation, who are already subject to heightened scrutiny, combining or linking datasets can expose group-level patterns (e.g. concentrations in certain locations or demographic profiles) that risk further stigmatisation or enforcement action and that are also not covered in emergent regulations aimed at AI use (e.g. the EU AI act).

To mitigate these risks, it is advisable to adopt a 'dynamic approach to anonymisation' (Reed-Berendt et al., 2022). Rather than treating anonymisation as a one-off technical step, this approach recognises that identifiability can change over time or through the linking of datasets. Researchers must therefore remain vigilant, proactively assessing and reducing the risk of harmful inferences that can be made about vulnerable groups. This demands careful design of data access policies, technical safeguards, and ethical review processes, ensuring that individual and collective rights are protected at all stages.

Data sources and uncritical categories

A further ethics risk is that existing migration data sources and infrastructures have become 'invisible' or are taken for granted. Taylor and Meissner (2024) encourage researcher to uncover "a new form of metadata", namely that of data infrastructures, so as to understand who designed them, with what interests and with what assumptions about migration. Ethical practice requires resisting the role of passive data consumers, and interrogating the powers, politics and purposes built into the data systems that frame (ir)regular migration.

We should also avoid uncritically reproducing politically charged categories. Research on irregular migration often relies on legal-administrative labels that obscure lived experiences and intersectional inequalities. Such labels risk treating 'irregular' status as a dominant or 'master status' that overshadows other factors such as gender, ethnicity, racialisation, class, etc. This reification of legal categories can have real-world consequences, including legitimising restrictive policies and contributing to public fears or moral panics. As Bakewell (2008) warns for refugee studies, there is a danger of "co-producing" the problem we claim to study by adopting policy actors' assumptions uncritically.