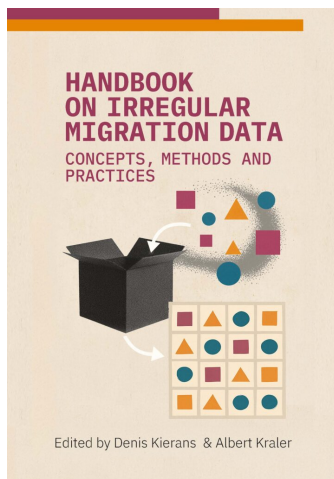




Textbox taken from D.Kierans & A.Kraler (eds),
Handbook on Irregular Migration Data. Concepts,
Methods and Practices. Krems: University of Krems Press

ISBN: 978-3-903470-24-8

Box 3.2 Addressing ethical challenges in surveying irregular migrants – The MIMAP survey on the im-/mobility of rejected asylum seekers

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To cite: Stache, R. (2025). Addressing ethical challenges in surveying irregular migrants – The MIMAP survey on the im-/mobility of rejected asylum seekers. In D. Kierans and A. Kraler (eds), *Handbook on Irregular Migration Data. Concepts, Methods and Practices*. Krems: University of Krems Press. <https://doi.org/10.48341/g31s-vq79-box3.2>

Keywords: Data protection sensitive sampling, MIMAP survey

such biases are relatively minor. She argues that migration status should more often be included in surveys, because this would enrich theoretical understandings of migrants' experiences and inform policy development. However, this assumes that migrants know their status and would report it openly and accurately.

This highlights the importance of reflexivity in interpretation, recognising whose experiences are represented and whose are overlooked. Such critical awareness should guide transparent communication to policymakers in order to prevent decisions based on incomplete or skewed evidence, which may further marginalise already vulnerable populations.

Safeguarding rights and responsible data use

Trust and mistrust

Trust is a foundational element in the collection and use of migration data. Descamps and Boswell (2018) show how institutional mistrust (e.g. fuelled by rivalries, lack of transparency, conflicting incentives, etc.) undermines coordination and data sharing. Mistrust between agencies can lead to fragmented systems, duplicated efforts, and ultimately weaker evidence for policymaking.

At the same time, migrants themselves may deeply distrust data collection efforts. Fear of surveillance, deportation, or misuse of personal information reduces willingness to participate or share accurate data (Kraler et al., 2015). This affects not only research quality but also the credibility of policy

responses. However, when trust is established through robust safeguards and ethical practice, data collection and use can serve positive purposes. Responsible data use can inform the design of social inclusion programmes, improve service provision, and support policies that protect migrant's rights.

Researchers need to recognise that trust cannot be demanded but must be earned through ethical practice, including respecting autonomy, ensuring confidentiality, negotiating consent to participate, and demonstrating commitment to protecting research participants from harm. These principles must guide both data collection and the wider institutional relationships on which migration data systems depend (see Box 3.2, for an example).

Box 3.2: Addressing ethical challenges in surveying irregular migrants – The MIMAP survey on the im-/mobility of rejected asylum seekers

Randy Stache

When no sampling frame exists (e.g. when studying irregular migrants unknown to the authorities) or when particularly sensitive topics are being explored, conventional survey methods quickly reach their limits. Irregular migrants are hard-to-reach and hard-to-survey: The group is blurry and elusive (hard to identify, highly mobile with mistrust against authorities and researchers). The group also is socially and legally marginalised, vulnerable and typically lacks prior engagement with empirical research. Many are familiar with interviews only in the context of authorities, such as police or asylum proceedings. These conditions raise ethical challenges, including data protection, informed consent, and the positionality of researchers. In consequence, innovative and adaptive methodological approaches are needed.

One example for such an approach is the MIMAP project (“Feasibility study on the im-/mobility of rejected asylum seekers”). Conducted between 2022 and 2025 by the Research Centre of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in Germany, a part of the project focused on irregular migrants from Anglophone West Africa who had undergone an asylum procedure in Germany. It employed an innovative mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey research with in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. Ten rejected asylum seekers were repeatedly interviewed and accompanied in their everyday lives. This ethnographic engagement facilitated trust-building and enabled the identification of key community individuals who acted as gatekeepers for the quantitative study. The survey applied Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), implemented via a custom-designed mobile application. The app hosted the survey, ensured full anonymity by collecting no personal data, and enabled participants to digitally refer the survey to up to three peers. Participants received a digital €10 shopping voucher both for completing the survey and for each successful referral.

To explore the sensitive issue of mobility aspirations (staying, returning, or migrating onward) the survey incorporated a factorial survey. Participants evaluated four hypothetical profiles of individuals with a ‘tolerated’ status, whose characteristics (e.g., length of stay: 1, 4, or 10 years) were experimentally varied. Respondents were asked to recommend whether each fictional individual should stay in Germany, return to the country of origin, or migrate to another country. The experimental variation enabled the identification of factors that shape im-/mobility aspirations. In line with the contextualizing qualitative interviews, the quantitative findings show that employment status, conditions in the country of origin, and the location of own children strongly influence (im) mobility aspirations. In contrast, migration enforcement policies such as deportation pressures and return assistance play minor roles (Stache et al., 2025).

Combining qualitative interviews and ethnographic trust-building with a respondent-driven sampling featuring an anonymous, app-based survey and a survey experiment, enabled the systematic investigation of sensitive topics among a highly inaccessible population – while maintaining ethical rigor and contextual depth.

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Transparency, contestability and responsibility

Quantifying irregular migration can lend findings a veneer of objectivity and authority that masks their contingent, uncertain nature. Numbers often

carry persuasive power in policy debates, but when poorly communicated or misinterpreted estimates can mislead decision-makers or the public.

Ethical responsibility demands that researchers clearly communicate the limits and assumptions of