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Box 4.1: Uncertainty in irregular migration data

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Box 4.1: Uncertainty in irregular migration data*Denis Kierans*

There are three main sources of uncertainty in irregular migration data:

- **Conceptual uncertainty** arises from disagreements over who should count as an irregular migrant. Legal definitions vary across jurisdictions, media usage is inconsistent, and there is no universal agreement on terminology in academic circles, either. The MirreM project distinguishes three categories: (1) migrants in an irregular situation, (2) migrants with a provisional status or a claim to one, and (3) EU citizens without residence rights. This taxonomy helps make explicit the assumptions behind different datasets and more detail on this can be found in Chapter 2.
- **Ethical uncertainty** emerges from the tension between producing data, such as estimates and indicators, on irregular migration and protecting individual rights. Certain types of data collection run the risk of compromising privacy and creating risks for vulnerable people. Furthermore, due to the political sensitivity of this area, these numbers – irrespective of their quality – can contribute to negative public sentiment and actions towards migrants in general and be used to justify reactionary and punitive policymaking. More information about ethics and data protection can be found in Chapter 3.
- **Practical uncertainty** is related to observability. Many irregular migrants avoid contact with authorities and may not appear in traditional sources of data on migration, such as administrative systems or surveys. Indicators based on events (e.g., border apprehensions, deaths occurring during the migration process in the Mediterranean, the English Channel or along the US – Mexico border) only capture the visible portion of the phenomenon. Estimating what is not directly observed requires the use of methods underpinned by assumptions, some more plausible than others.

This chapter focuses primarily on the conceptual and practical aspects of uncertainty. However, it is important to consider all elements when assessing and using irregular migration data.

What types of irregular migration data are there?

Data on irregular migration can be categorised broadly in two important ways. First, as either stock or flow data:

- **Stocks:** Quantitative estimates of the number of irregular migrants present in a given country or area at a particular point in time. Stock data help to answer questions such as “how many irregular migrants are living in Country X today?”
- **Flows:** Data that describe movements into, within, or out of irregular status over a specified period of time. Flow data help to answer questions like “how many irregular migrants were apprehended at the border in the past month?”

Second, irregular migration data can be distinguished as an estimate or an indicator:

- **Estimates:** quantifying a population group that cannot be directly observed or counted. Estimates help to answer questions such as “how many irregular migrants we living in the United States in 2020?”
- **Indicators:** Counts of observed events, such as border apprehensions or asylum decisions. Indicators help to answer questions like “how many migrants were intercepted by border control last quarter?” Indicators can track trends and inform planning but do not capture full populations. They often feed into estimates.