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Box 4.2: Irregular migration to the UK: A Home Office statistical overview

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Box 4.2: Irregular migration to the UK: A Home Office statistical overview*Jon Simmons and Lucy Swinnerton*

The Home Office publishes a wide range of statistics that reflect different aspects of irregular migration to the UK, drawn from the department's operational systems.

Daily counts of small boat arrivals in the English Channel provide a near real-time operational snapshot of people detected arriving in the UK this way. These figures, published on GOV.UK,¹ with a public dataset of daily arrivals, are manually collated by Border Force officers and offer a timely but provisional view of one of the most visible forms of irregular entry.

The Home Office's comprehensive publication of statistics on the operation of the UK immigration system are the quarterly 'Immigration System Statistics',² which bring together administrative data from operational and case working systems to provide a wide range of information on irregular migration. This includes demographic details of those arriving to the UK by small boat (age, sex and nationality), as well as information on asylum claims made by small boat arrivals, decisions on those claims, and referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for potential victims of modern slavery.

Publicly available data on irregular arrivals are not limited to those entering the UK on small boats. Data on inadequately documented air arrivals (individuals arriving without valid or with fraudulent documents) and detections in-country and at ports are also recorded on Home Office systems and included in published statistics. The department also publishes statistics on immigration enforcement activity, including return of small boat arrivals with no right to remain in the UK. This information helps to contextualise the experiences and outcomes of individuals arriving to the UK via irregular routes and compliments other forms of research.

Data on irregular arrivals are derived from live operational systems and so numbers may change as more information is added. The statistics sometimes present a partial picture of most recent events due to time required for data validation or additional safeguarding assessments, or the time necessary to come to a decision on often complex individual cases. Although the statistics are drawn from live systems and may be subject to revision, they do nonetheless provide a consistent and broad basis for understanding patterns over time.

The Home Office statistics are accredited Official Statistics published according to the Code of Practice for Statistics overseen by the UK Statistics Authority. The published 'User Guide to Immigration System Statistics'³ provides documentation to support understanding of the data, including definitions, data sources, and known limitations.

While the statistics published by the Home Office provide a wide range of valuable insights, they cannot capture the full extent of irregular migration. Some individuals evade detection entirely while others may see their status change. Others of course regularise their status, for example through a successful application for refugee status. The Home Office has published some initial information in relation to those who arrive on a visa but subsequently claim asylum (including individuals who overstay their visa and claim after their visa status is no longer valid),⁴ but this is novel and complex data and so unlike the regular quarterly outputs at present it is regarded as 'statistics in development'.

It is also possible that the same person may be detected at multiple times in different operational systems, which cannot always or simply be linked. These statistics therefore offer a partial view of irregular migration and users should interpret data with care, carefully considering the limitations and assumptions that underpin them.

1 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migrants-detected-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats>.

2 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release>.

3 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-home-office-immigration-statistics-9/user-guide-to-immigration-statistics>.

4 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/source-of-asylum-claims-in-2024/source-of-asylum-claims-in-2024>.