Box 8.2: Understanding asylum data in the context of irregular and regular migration

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Data on asylum applications are used widely used as indicators of mixed migration to and within the EU+.[8] Yet interpreting these figures in relation to irregular and regular migration requires careful nuance. Many asylum seekers cross borders undetected, some enter legally, and others apply repeatedly in the same country or move between EU+ countries. This complexity creates challenges for measurement, interpretation and policy.

As of mid-2025, there were 1.3 million asylum applications in the EU+ still awaiting a final decision. This highlights the scale of people currently staying with unresolved legal status—many of whom may eventually find themselves in an irregular position if their claim is rejected. In 2024, EU+ countries issued around a third of a million negative asylum decisions. While some appeal such decisions, many abscond and remain without legal residence.

Visa policy provides a direct link between asylum and regular migration. In 2024, around a quarter of all asylum applications in the EU+ were lodged by persons originating from visa-exempt countries. Such persons can enter the EU for touristic reasons without needing to apply for visa. Many do so, and then claim asylum. Conversely, those from visa-obliged countries may apply for a visa and then arrive regularly and apply for asylum. The share of visa holders among asylum applicants is quite important in some EU+ countries.

However, irregular entry remains extremely important for asylum applications. EUAA estimates suggest that in 2024, detected illegal border-crossings by land and sea accounted for about 1 in 7 asylum applications overall, rising to a third of all asylum applications in frontline Member States. However, these only reflect actual detections at the border. Undetected irregular arrivals are, by definition, not counted—meaning any analysis based solely on detections risks underestimating the scale. This makes it even more important to triangulate asylum data with other sources.

Asylum applications can also reveal secondary movements—people applying sequentially in more than one EU+ country or applying in EU+ countries other than the one they initially entered. In 2024, nearly 150,000 decisions were issued in response to outgoing Dublin requests, which, we estimate, relates to about 14% of total applications. Such requests are made under the Dublin III Regulation which establishes which Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application. Most of these requests were for reasons related to secondary movements. Even persons with refugee status have been known to move and reapply elsewhere. Data from Eurodac, the EU's biometric database for asylum and irregular entry, provide additional insights. In 2023, there were more than 276,000 instances of asylum applications being linked to recent irregular border-crossings. Just over half applied for asylum in the same Member State where they were detected, while the rest applied for asylum in another Member State. These matches illustrate the link between irregular entry and asylum applications, but the Eurodac data have limitations including potential double counting, the exclusion of children under 14, and the lack of breakdowns by nationality.

Repeated asylum applications add another layer of complexity. According to eu-LISA,[9] only 55% of applications lodged in 2023 were first-time claims, indicating that nearly half of all applicants had already lodged previous asylum applications somewhere in the EU+. EUAA estimates suggest that nearly a tenth were individuals reapplying in the same EU+ country (in both 2023 and 2024), often after remaining in the country for an extended period—typically in an irregular or tolerated status.

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8   EU+ = EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

9   E-LISA stands for the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT.

Asylum data can also reflect demographic patterns. Some applicants are children born in the EU+ to an asylum-seeking parent, in some cases making up more than 10% of all applicants. These figures reflect how status can persist intergenerationally without clear legal resolution.

Looking ahead, under the Interoperability Regulation, the Central Repository for Reporting and Statistics (CRRS), currently under development, is expected to deliver cross-system statistics that will significantly improve our understanding of these dynamics. It will enable anonymous tracking across databases and provide more precise insights into how individuals move through stages of irregular entry, legal stay, asylum and status withdrawal.

In short, asylum data provide a valuable but incomplete window into migration stocks. They reflect both regular and irregular situations but must be interpreted with care. Analysts should consider visa status, secondary movements, repeated applications and related demographic patterns. When triangulated with detections at the border, visa records, and Dublin statistics, asylum data help clarify not only the scale of irregular presence, but also how individuals engage with EU+ migration and protection frameworks.

Box 8.3: Understanding 4Mi data

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What is 4Mi?

4Mi, developed by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), is an innovative and global data collection platform[10] that provides independent and in-depth insights into the experiences of migrants moving along mixed migration routes. Since 2014, 4Mi has become the world's largest globally comparable primary data collection system focused specifically on people on the move, with more than 130,000 interviews conducted in over 30 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

Rationale and scope

4Mi was created to fill a major evidence gap around the realities faced by migrants and refugees in transit—populations often invisible in traditional migration statistics due to their irregular or non-camp-based status. The initiative contributes directly to the Global Compact for Migration's Objective 1 by providing accurate and disaggregated data for informed policy-making.

Methodology

Data are collected through one-on-one, structured interviews using standardized yet adaptable survey tools, administered by a large network community-based enumerators (approx. 130 as of 2025), most of whom are migrants or refugees themselves. These enumerators are embedded in local contexts, ensuring high trust and access to hard-to-reach groups. In countries where MMC is not established, data are collected through local partners rooted in the countries. Surveys are quantitative, enabling statistically robust analysis, but also include open-ended questions to capture personal narratives. Sampling is purposive, with enumerators operating in migration hubs identified through scoping and mapping exercises. While not statistically representative, the data are highly indicative, enabling rich, contextual understanding of profiles, drivers, journeys,, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of people on the move.

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10 See https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-faq/