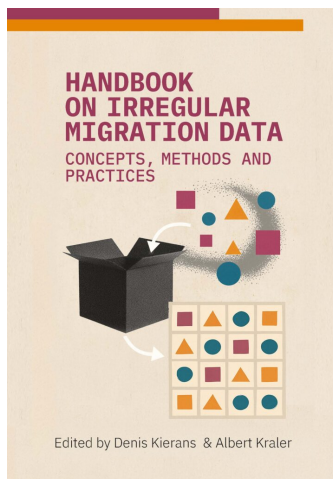




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Box 10.3 Reliability in measuring migrants' legal trajectories and experiences of irregularity in a retrospective survey: The case of "Trajectories and Origins 2"

Julia Descamps

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Another smaller scale example is the **Parchemins Study**, a prospective, mixed-methods panel survey conducted alongside Operation Papyrus, the 2017–2018 regularisation scheme for undocumented economic migrants in the Swiss canton of Geneva.

It tracked approximately 400 individuals up to 3 years after regularisation, focussing on the effects of regularisation on their health and well-being (Lives Centre, 2020).

Retrospective surveys on migrants who currently hold a legal status collecting data on their past experiences of irregularity

A third type of survey focuses on the past irregular experiences of migrants who now hold legal status. By working with immigrants holding legal status, these surveys simplify sampling design, but rely on respondents' recall and willingness to disclose prior undocumented residence through direct questions (e.g., 'Have you ever been irregular?') and collecting information on how their legal status changed over time (e.g., the types and timings of residence permits).

Examples include the **Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens (SCIF)** survey, conducted by the Italian National Statistical Office

(Istat) in 2011-12, and **Trajectories and Origins 2 (TeO2)**, carried out by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) in 2019-20 (see Box 10.3). One of the main limitations of these studies lies in their exclusive focus on the initial phase of irregularity (i.e., between arrival in the destination country and the acquisition of a first permit) without reconstructing respondents' full legal status trajectory. To address this limitation, one could extend the time frame by combining retrospective questions about past legal status with longitudinal or prospective data that track respondents over time.

Box 10.3: Reliability in measuring migrants' legal trajectories and experiences of irregularity in a retrospective survey: The case of "Trajectories and Origins 2"

Julia Descamps

In a retrospective survey, how much can we rely on the data collected on legal status and past episodes of irregularity? Drawing on the example of the French Trajectories and Origins survey (Ined, INSEE, 2019-2020), the potential biases were considered (Descamps, 2024). Two of these are particularly challenging in the context of surveying irregular migration. Memory bias, which occurs when the content of a response depends on the ability to recall information, could affect migrants with insecure and bumpy legal trajectory. Social desirability bias, a tendency to present oneself in a favorable light to others, might be more prevalent among migrants who have experienced irregularity, an experience on the legal margins, therefore particularly sensitive. Those biases are tested using TeO2 survey, by examining the non-response rates, and quantifying the under-reporting of irregularity, on a sample of 7,057 immigrants arrived to France after the age of 18.

Non-response to the question "Have you ever been irregular?" is low (1%), and does not increase with the length of time since arrival, unlike the non-response rate on the first legal permit in France. Regarding irregularity, memory bias appears to be minimal: respondents found it more difficult to recall events from the early stages of their legal journey, but were less hesitant when it came to irregularity.

The length of time that respondents declare they spent as irregular migrants is then compared with a proxy for irregular status on entry: the time it took them to obtain their first residence permit (from the year they entered France to the year they obtained their first residence permit). Positive differences between the two figures (reported time with undocumented status inferior to time before first residence permit obtained) are taken as evidence of under-reporting of periods of irregular status by respondents. Taking only those respondents with a gap between accessing France and obtaining their first permit – who could therefore underreport this situation – 70% of cases match within one year. The proportion of under-reported irregularity is 27%. This rate is an estimate of the social desirability bias. This bias appears to be more prevalent among educated migrants. The feeling of downward social mobility associated with irregular status, stronger when the social status in the home country is high, can lead respondents to regain control over their migratory narrative. The same is true of asylum applicants who were denied refugee status: they also tend to under-report irregularity. Their experience of administrative domination could lead them to modify their account of their irregular status. Social desirability bias could also overlap with memory bias, with partial answers being due to the often precarious and rocky migration trajectories of asylum seekers.

These results highlight the importance of statistically surveying migrants about their various legal statuses and experiences of irregularity. Particular attention should be paid to the effects of categorisation and the leeway it provides.

References:

Descamps, J. (2024). Can We See Their ID? Measuring Immigrants' Legal Trajectory: Lessons From a French Survey. *International Migration Review*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183241295995>

Another notable example is the ELIPA 2 French panel, conducted by the Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer in three waves (2019, 2020, and 2022) with a representative sample of immigrants who obtained their first residence permit in France in 2018. In addition to other topics, the survey collected both retrospective and ongoing information on the administrative process of respondents, allowing researchers to reconstruct their legal status trajectories over a four-year period.

A common limitation of these surveys is that they only include immigrants who have obtained legal

status at some point, thereby excluding those who remain undocumented. However, retrospective surveys also offer several advantages. First, instead of treating legal status as a fixed condition, they make it possible to investigate specific phases of irregularity, which is particularly valuable in contexts characterised by recurrent regularisations. Second, by relying on large samples and rich questionnaires, they enable long-term analyses of the consequences of irregular status over multiple time periods and dimensions of migrants' lives.

11 See <https://mixedmigration.org/resources/>

12 See <https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/>

13 More information on 4Mi can be found at <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/4Mi-Introduction.pdf>