

Towards the More Effective Use of Irregular Migration Data in Policymaking

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Executive Summary

Concerns around irregular migration have dominated media headlines across Europe, shaped elections, and influenced historic policy initiatives such as the new Pact on Migration and Asylum. Discussions and policymaking related to irregular migration are often heavily influenced by the latest numbers and estimates of quickly changing irregular migration trends, such as the number of border crossings or apprehensions of migrants without legal status. Such data also play an important role in advocacy, the evaluation of policies, operational planning, and efforts to foster dialogue and policy innovation.

But before policymakers, practitioners, researchers, nongovernmental organisation staff, and other actors use data on irregular migration, datasets are shaped by many different stakeholders, each with their own objectives and priorities. The first step in this pathway involves defining irregular migration, after which data are collected, shared, accessed, interpreted, and disseminated. In each step—from definition to dissemination—obstacles emerge that can hinder the effective collection and use of data to help manage migration, support communities in which irregular migrants live, and reach those migrants with essential services. Obstacles that arise earlier on in this process, for example unclear or in-

consistent definitions of irregular migration or issues related to data sharing and access, can create problems down the line for data users.

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These obstacles' causes and impacts are many and varied. However, EU-level and national workshops and expert interviews conducted for this project, as well as a comprehensive literature review, point to certain common challenges: Most data collection is a byproduct of ongoing operations or reflects political priorities on issues such as border security. Available datasets therefore often do not match the data needs of policymakers and other end users, and they often have gaps that limit policy development. Unclear and inconsistent definitions of irregular migration, meanwhile, increase the risk of data being misinterpreted and limit comparability over time and across geographies. Datasets on irregular migration also frequently do not include key information about how the data were collected and any associated data quality issues. At the same time, many actors using data on irregular migration lack the data literacy and expertise to properly assess a dataset's quality and to interpret its contents. Many actors

may also struggle to access existing data because of unclear legal regulations, technical and practical obstacles (such as a lack of interoperability between data systems), and informal data-sharing practices that heavily rely on trust and institutional relationships. Finally, even when data are available, potential users may opt not to use them because they do not view them as suited to their needs, because they do not trust their quality and neutrality, or because they are simply not aware the data exist.

Efforts to address these challenges could begin from several starting points. These include strengthening local-level data collection, separating data collection from law enforcement functions, harmonising definitions of key concepts, and investing in building users' capacity and data literacy. Additionally, improving the interoperability of data systems—with proper safeguards in place—and formalising data-sharing agreements could help enhance the accessibility and reliability of irregular migration data. Ultimately, while the increasing availability of data provides hope for more accurate estimates and more evidence-informed policymaking, it remains essential to approach data use with care and safeguards. Recognising the limitations of current datasets and taking steps to manage data users' expectations will be necessary to help ensure that data serve as a tool for constructive dialogue and effective policy development, rather than a source of misinformation, fearmongering, and human rights violations.

1 Introduction

Across Europe, concerns around irregular migration levels have dominated media headlines and shaped recent elections. Politicians have frequently used statistics on how many migrants arrive by boat or cross land borders as key talking points, including to justify sweeping migration policy changes.¹ Tackling irregular migration also features prominently in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted by the

Council in May 2024, with its focus on securing the European Union's external borders and preventing irregular departures from other countries through international partnerships.² The same month, 15 EU Member States sent a letter to the European Commission calling on the bloc to go beyond the pact and 'think out of the box' in its efforts to counter irregular migration.³

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Discussions and policymaking on irregular migration are often a numbers game, fuelled by the latest estimates on changing migration trends and populations. Beyond shaping policymaking, data on irregular migration are also used for decision-making, advocacy, and strategic and operational planning. This can include allocating budgets and hiring staff, understanding the situation and needs of people with irregular status and the communities in which they live, evaluating whether policies are effective and where gaps exist, and fostering dialogue, innovation, and research.⁴

But despite playing such an important role, data on irregular migration are often inadequate. Some types of data are lacking altogether,⁵ and the limited data available are often collected and published for specific purposes.⁶ This results in differences in how different sources define who counts as an irregular migrant (see Box 1), how accessible datasets are, and what their quality is, with considerable consequences for policymakers, service providers, and other stakeholders that would benefit from better access to reliable data.

BOX 1**Who is an irregular migrant?**

Despite widespread attention to the phenomenon of irregular migration, differences persist in the definition and usage of terms such as ‘irregular’, ‘illegal’, ‘unauthorized’, and ‘undocumented’ migration and migrants. One of the most influential definitions comes from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), whose glossary describes an irregular migrant as a person whose movement ‘takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the state of origin, transit, or destination’. In the European Union, the 2008 Return Directive provides a common definition of ‘illegal stay’ as ‘the presence on the territory of a Member State of a third-country national who does not fulfil, or no longer fulfils, the conditions of entry [...], stay, or residence in that Member State’. At an operational level, Member States vary in how they sanction unauthorized entry and stay, and in whether and how these migrants are recorded in official statistics.

Notably, there are a variety of ways in which someone may end up in irregular status. The Measuring Irregular Migration and Related Policies (MlrreM) project has developed a typology to help make sense of these differences, focusing on transitions into and out of irregularity. The typology also further refines distinctions between third-country nationals with an irregular status, those holding a provisional status (such as a pending asylum application), and mobile EU citizens without a right to stay in a Member State (such as EU citizens unable to demonstrate the required income level for their initial period of settlement).

This policy brief uses ‘data on irregular migration’ to refer to any numerical estimate that gives an indication of the size or characteristics of irregular arrivals and departures (also called inflows and outflows) or the population of irregular migrants in a country or region (the irregular migrant stock). This includes data on border crossings, migrants who overstay a visa, those ordered to leave the European Union, and more.

Sources: IOM, *International Migration Law No. 34 - Glossary on Migration* (Geneva: IOM, 2019), 116; Albert Kraller and Jill Ahrens, ‘Conceptualising Migrant Irregularity for Measurement Purposes’ (working paper 2, MlrreM project, 30 April 2023); CLANDESTINO Project, *Final Report* (N.p.: CLANDESTINO Project, 2009); ‘Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on Common Standards and Procedures in Member States for Returning Illegally Staying Third-Country Nationals’, *Official Journal of the European Union* 2008/115/EC (16 December 2008).

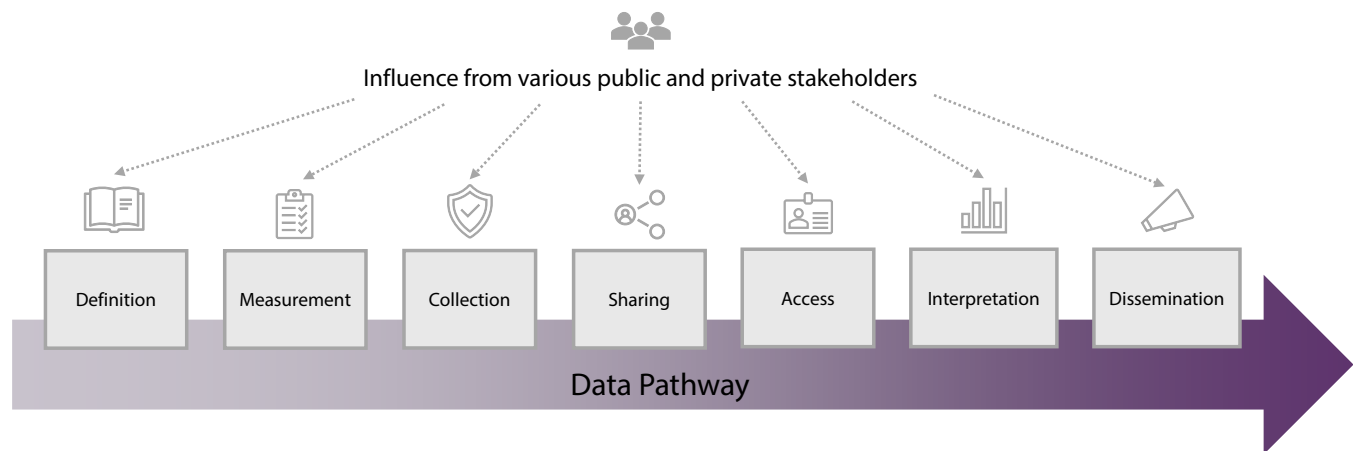
This policy brief explores obstacles that hinder the effective collection and use of irregular migration data, how this affects policymakers and other actors, and some potential avenues for strengthening the evidence base, drawing on concrete examples. The analysis presented in this brief is based on a comprehensive literature review; input from policymakers, subject matter experts, practitioners, nongovernmental organisation (NGO) representatives, and other key stakeholders during fieldwork (ten national workshops in European countries,⁷ one EU-level workshop, and a series of interviews in Canada); and insights shared in other interviews, including by representatives from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, the European Union Agency for Asylum, the Europe-

an Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Eurostat, and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

2 Challenges to Effective Data Practices

Before policymakers, practitioners, researchers, NGO staff, and other actors have a chance to use data on irregular migration, a variety of stakeholders—each with their own objectives and priorities—shape the data as they move through what can be viewed as a ‘data pathway’.⁸ Before data can be collected, key concepts such as ‘irregular migration’ must be defined, after which the data collectors decide how to

FIGURE 1
The data pathway



Source: Authors' illustration.

measure this quantitatively. Data are then collected, shared, accessed, interpreted, and disseminated (see Figure 1). Notably, this data pathway is not always a linear process; steps may be skipped or repeated.

Throughout this process—from definition to dissemination—obstacles can emerge that stand in the way of the effective collection and use of irregular migration data. Obstacles that arise earlier on, for example unclear or inconsistent definitions of irregular migration (see Box 1) or issues related to data sharing and access, create problems down the line for actors using the data. This section outlines the challenges surrounding the collection and use of irregular migration data, including those related to data gaps, inconsistent definitions, sharing and accessing data, and data non-usage.

A. Data gaps and collection bias

While countries generally collect some information on irregular migration, gaps in data availability—sometimes linked to the selective collection of indicators—are one of the main challenges for policymakers, researchers, and civil-society entities seeking to use such data.⁹ For instance, datasets often focus on a specific set of irregular migrants, such as rejected asylum seekers in the European con-

text.¹⁰ Information on irregular border crossings is also relatively widely available, due to data collected by national police, border guards, and Frontex. Yet, crossings are only an indicator of the overall inflow of irregular migrants; because a single individual may cross a border more than once, some border crossings are not detected, and some migrants who cross a border later leave or are removed from the country, it is very difficult to extrapolate the number of irregular migrants in a country based on detections at border crossings alone.¹¹

In addition, border crossings represent only one of many routes into irregularity, and other groups are regularly undercounted in data on irregular migrants. These include visa overstayers, children born to irregular migrants, victims of trafficking, and migrants in informal work.¹² Reforms such as the European Union's new Entry Exit System may improve data collection on visa overstayers,¹³ but some of these gaps will likely remain. Furthermore, data on secondary movement—that is, when migrants move from the EU country in which they first arrived to another—are almost completely unavailable, even though most officials and civil-society actors know from experience that such mobility can be substantial among irregular migrants.¹⁴ Information on the characteristics of the irregular migrant population

are also rare across the European Union. The lack of data on the sociodemographic characteristics of irregular migrants prevents the disaggregation of data or analysis of key subgroups, such as women or children residing irregularly in the European Union. Finally, longitudinal data able to shed light on irregular migrants' trajectories over time are extremely rare.

Two key challenges contribute to these gaps in data. First, data gaps may arise because the priorities of actors collecting data do not always match the needs and priorities of data users. In fact, most data related to irregular migration are collected as a by-product of ongoing operations (e.g., border controls) or with the aim of improving operational planning (e.g., staffing or budgeting), rather than to establish an evidence base for research and policymaking, as household surveys or census data would. In Ireland, for example, an official noted during a MirreM workshop that most of their department's information on irregular migrants stems from the national police's enforcement activities. As a result, the available information on irregular migrants in Ireland only 'skims the surface', they said, since it overlooks those who typically do not come into contact with the police, such as domestic workers with irregular status.¹⁵

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A second contributing factor for these data gaps is the context in which irregular migration takes place. For instance, it is difficult to collect data on secondary movement in Europe because most movement between EU countries happens within the Schengen free movement zone. However, some information can be drawn from existing databases; for example, the Eurodac database stores the fingerprints of asylum applicants and information on their country of

first entry into the European Union, which makes it possible to trace secondary movement if they are later apprehended in another Member State. The revised legal framework for this database may expand the evidence base on secondary movement (and irregular migration more broadly), given its introduction of a requirement to collect data on all third-country nationals who have been found irregularly on EU territory and on changes in their legal status.¹⁶ Yet, the changes to Eurodac have also been met with criticism; for example, 110 civil-society organisations have argued that the changes are inconsistent with fundamental rights.¹⁷

For fear of deportation, irregular migrants also tend to be hesitant about contact with public authorities, even when they face hardship or abuse. As a result, most of the civil-society stakeholders interviewed for this research said that they do not register the immigration status of the individuals they serve unless it is necessary (whether stipulated by funding requirements or related to research and advocacy work).¹⁸ These types of more or less formalised 'firewalls' are often meant to separate the delivery of essential services from immigration law enforcement.¹⁹

The most obvious implication of these data gaps and collection biases is that the evidence base on irregular migration is incomplete, limiting policy development or forcing policymakers to be creative. For example, in Canada, some city-level regularisation initiatives have been designed despite an absence of data on the size and characteristics of the irregular migrant population. Instead, they rely on either predetermined caps for how many immigrants can enrol or are open programmes that can be modified after their launch to reflect the level of uptake.²⁰ While such flexibility can enable policymakers to move ahead with important initiatives, despite a lack of relevant data, these gaps nonetheless complicate planning and can lead to uneven or unequitable policy impacts. In a regularisation campaign, for example, some groups may be more

aware of and likely to participate in the programme than others, and a lack of solid data can hinder outreach to the latter group and leave potentially eligible individuals in irregular status.

Policy design and implementation may similarly be limited when data exist but were collected for other purposes, often due to the divergent objectives of central government agencies and regional or local authorities or other data users. For instance, in Austria, MlrreM workshop participants representing the country's federal states reported frustration with having to rely on data provided by the Ministry of the Interior that lack crucial information for their work. The federal data comprise high-level, quantitative statistics (e.g., on the number of asylum applications accepted or rejected), while stakeholders in the country's reception system require more in-depth, qualitative data related to the composition of target groups and the social aspects of integration. This misalignment makes it hard for regional and local authorities to plan ahead, estimate how many persons they should expect to settle in their jurisdiction, and forecast the needs of this population.²¹

B. *Unclear or inconsistent definitions and a lack of data literacy*

In this already data-scarce landscape, the varied definitions of who is an irregular migrant, a lack of awareness of data quality, and other data literacy issues can easily result in misinterpretation. For example, national border guards often count the number of attempted crossings, but if those data are taken as counts of irregular migrants, that produces inflated estimates because multiple attempts may be made by unsuccessful border crossers.²² Without a solid understanding of why such proxy indicators are being used (lack of population data) and what risks they carry (overestimation), policymakers and

the public may falsely interpret these rough estimates as facts.

The first issue here—inconsistent and unclear definitions of irregular migration—complicates not only data collection but also data use and comparability. Irregularity has long lacked a consistent definition (see Box 1), and from a legal perspective, it has often been defined as a residual category.²³ No definition is given for irregular migration in international agreements such as the Global Compact on Migration. And at the EU policy level, irregularity was not defined until the 2008 Return Directive.²⁴ More recently, despite the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum's multiple references to irregular migration, for instance in the Screening Regulation²⁵ which focuses on border crossings, no comprehensive discussion of what constitutes irregularity is included in the pact. This is also an issue at the national level, with many countries—including major destination countries such as Canada—lacking a legal definition of irregularity.²⁶ Even among EU Member States, which can rely on the EU definition via the Return Directive, various definitions of irregularity are used for data collection and measurement. This lack of clarity can also extend to other key concepts, such as when it is not clear what different categories of irregular migration a dataset represents. Polish border guards, for example, report on detected, detained, and disclosed attempts by migrants to cross the border, but there is no formal definition of 'detected', 'detained', and 'disclosed' cases. As a result, NGOs and other data users do not know with certainty what is being reported and, thus, cannot use the data.²⁷

Second, a lack of information about data collection and quality (metadata) can prevent the effective interpretation, use, and comparability of irregular migration data. For example, border-crossing data are often collected by border guards who lack a formal means to provide contextual information on how they collect the data. When data are then shared with a country's authorities or statistical offices, im-

portant information about the exact nature of their measurement, the local conditions in which they were collected, and potential data quality issues can get lost and, thus, cannot be taken into consideration by end users. And even when metadata exist about the quality and comparability of irregular migration data, it may be difficult to find. Eurostat, for example, offers metadata for its migration data, and this explanatory information flags issues with cross-country comparability.²⁸ Yet, the specific comparability issues are discussed not in the main metadata but in methodological annexes, which can make this information difficult to locate, and it is often outdated.²⁹

A third challenge is that many actors lack the data literacy and expertise to properly interpret and use irregular migration data. Policymakers are interested in hard facts and clear numbers that can be used to inform policy decisions. However, they often lack a common language with the entities producing data on irregular migration, which can hinder their understanding of data categories and quality issues. For example, authorities working directly with data at the EU level have reported struggling to communicate with other stakeholders about the uncertainties surrounding their estimates of irregular migration stocks and flows.³⁰ Beyond the risk of misinterpreting data, a lack of expertise and staff capacity can also lead some actors to simply not use available data, even when having the latest information is essential, such as in forecasting. For example, a representative of an EU institution noted in a MlrreM workshop that data on wars, natural disasters, protests, and other indicators relevant to the prediction of (irregular) migration flows are available and regularly updated as part of the GDELT project,³¹ but also that most organisations lack the resources to analyse these real-time data.³² Moreover, public institutions, such as the Office for Foreigners, Job Centres, and Ministry of Family and Social Issues in Poland, possess large amounts of data that could shed light on irregular migration trends but are un-

able to process or use the data effectively due to a lack of in-house expertise and staff capacity, often reflecting tight public funding.³³

C. Obstacles to data access and sharing

Even when data on irregular migration stocks and flows are available, they can be difficult to access due to unclear legal regulations, technical and practical obstacles, and a lack of trust and institutional relationships between entities that produce and use data.

The first set of obstacles, unclear legal regulations, often reflect a tension between legal requirements to protect the rights of irregular migrants and a lack of certainty about how exactly these regulations may limit whether and by whom data on irregular migration can be shared and accessed. Across the MlrreM workshops held in various European countries, national authorities and experts mentioned that even though the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)³⁴ plays an important role in protecting individuals' rights, it can at times be an obstacle to data sharing (or be perceived as one). Workshop participants said it is often unclear what GDPR requires in certain circumstances, and in fear of noncompliance, many reported taking a 'better safe than sorry' approach and avoiding data sharing altogether, even when it may be legally possible under the GDPR.³⁵ On the flip side, even when data protection guidelines exist, they are not always respected, and this can result in violations of fundamental rights. Research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, for example, has found that authorities collect personal data on irregular migrants without providing easy to understand information on the purpose of the data collection, as is required by the GDPR.³⁶ This can be seen in how some countries implement the EU Employers Sanctions Directive, which aims to curb informal employment of

irregular migrants while also protecting irregular migrants from exploitation. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that the personal data of irregular migrants identified during labour inspections were being shared with immigration authorities and the police in 20 out of 25 countries.³⁷ Stronger safeguards in such cases would be useful to ensure that measures designed to protect against exploitation are not used for immigration enforcement.³⁸

Technical and practical obstacles present a second set of challenges to data sharing. Most notable in this regard is the common lack of interoperability between databases (that is, the ability of computer systems to exchange and make use of each other's information). At the EU level, a 2016 European Commission impact assessment on the establishment of the EU Entry/Exit System, for example, flagged the need for increased interoperability between this planned system for monitoring third-country nationals' movement into and out of the bloc and existing systems used by national authorities during border checks.³⁹ These findings have led to efforts to improve interoperability, such as by establishing a common identity repository. Interoperability is also important at the national level. Linking datasets across government departments was recognised by officials participating in MlrreM workshops as a tremendous technical and bureaucratic challenge in the United Kingdom, but one necessary to address in order to shine a light on population subgroups and to provide more information on how migration journeys play out over time.⁴⁰ In Ireland, meanwhile, the Department of Justice has access to multiple databases relevant to its work, such as the country's visa and immigration databases, but these databases are not linked and cooperation and communication between the people managing them appears limited at times.⁴¹ Effective data sharing also requires sufficient resources and staff, particularly to make information collected for a specific operational pur-

pose accessible and useful to actors seeking to use it for other purposes, such as long-term analysis.

A third and final set of obstacles to data sharing relates to the trust and institutional relationships that exist between entities producing and seeking access to irregular migration data. These issues, and a related fear of backlash, featured prominently in both the EU and national-level MlrreM workshops. Because many public authorities share data on an as-needed or case-by-case basis, trust and strong institutional relationships often shape whether data are shared and with whom. In Austria, for example, federal states and organisations can request (additional) data on irregular migration from the Ministry of the Interior, but it is up to the ministry to decide whether to respond to the request, and existing trusted relationships and cooperation reportedly play an important role in this decision.⁴² Political priorities also shape whether and how data are shared. A salient example comes from Poland, where news about potential abuses of the visa system in 2023 drew attention to the labour immigration statistics published by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy.⁴³ Once journalists started using and analysing the data, the datasets were removed from the ministry website and the ministry stopped publishing new data.⁴⁴

D. Data non-usage and underusage

Even when data exist and are accessible in principle, they are not always used to inform policymaking and operational decision-making. In interviews and workshops, officials, civil-society representatives, and other stakeholders pointed to several contributing factors: data users may view the available information as not suited to their needs, they may see it as unreliable or politically motivated, they may be unaware of it, or they may have concerns about the potential impacts of its use.

Data non-usage is particularly common when decisionmakers do not view the available data as relevant or optimised for the specific policy decisions they are grappling with. This is especially the case when data are made available only with lengthy time lags, or when they report aggregate numbers but do not allow for an analysis of subgroups. In some cases, data users have unrealistic expectations for the nature and robustness of irregular migration data. For instance, participants in the EU-level MIrreM workshop described policymakers sometimes disregarding available datasets because they are not representative of the entire irregular migrant population.⁴⁵ Yet, given that the composition of the irregular migrant population is unknown and sampling strategies are limited, irregular migration data sources typically cannot claim representativeness but may nonetheless have valuable insights to offer.

The second factor limiting the uptake of data on irregular migration is that potential data users may perceive available datasets as politically tainted and thus untrustworthy. Often, such views reflect concerns about potential data manipulation or selective reporting to serve a specific political agenda. For instance, in Spain, data on irregular migrant stocks created by Spain's official migration observatories are reportedly underused in policymaking because some policymakers view the data as lacking objectivity.⁴⁶ In some cases, concerns about data politicisation—and associated data non-usage—are rooted in a lack of transparency surrounding publicly available data. In particular, when explanations of data collection and calculation methods are not sufficiently comprehensible for practitioners to verify the reliability of the data, or at least not without investing significant effort and time, they may simply decide not to use the data.

Furthermore, some data may go unused because potential users are unaware of them. This was described as a challenge in MIrreM workshops, with one participant noting that gaps in end user knowledge about available data are especially common

at the local government level. Some departments, such as social services, are important producers of data on the irregular migrant population using their services. However, because policymakers are often unaware of the availability of such data, these sources of information are not fully utilised.⁴⁷

Finally, some actors may deliberately limit their use or dissemination of irregular migration data if they believe that the potential risks outweigh the benefits of doing so. For example, representatives of civil-society organisations have reported that the political context in which they operate sometimes influences their data usage, noting that they strive to find a balance between respecting the rights of irregular migrants and the desire for more and better publicly available data.⁴⁸ Even anonymous data and reporting on irregular migrants can heighten the vulnerability of such migrants and influence public narratives. Furthermore, data producers may feel that they have insufficient control over how their data are reproduced and interpreted, raising concerns about data being used without important contextual information or being misinterpreted. As a result, service providers and civil society may opt not to use data they collect for secondary purposes, and not to publicize that they have such data.

3 Learning from Best Practices and Innovations in Irregular Migration Data

Improving data practices in the domain of irregular migration is of paramount importance—not only to refining understanding of migration dynamics but also to empowering stakeholders to make informed decisions and implement targeted interventions, thus contributing to more balanced and potentially more humane migration management. Despite the many obstacles, there are also promising innova-

tions and best practices that can inform efforts to improve data collection and fill data gaps, clarify definitions and make data more consistent, improve data access and sharing, and reduce non-usage of available data. These include:

Harmonising definitions and measurement methodologies to improve data comparability, and sharing data manuals to prevent misinterpretation

Promising initiatives are underway to untangle and clarify the murky definitions of irregular migration. The MlrreM project, for example, has developed a taxonomy of migrant irregularity⁴⁹ and will publish a handbook covering data on migrant irregularity. Stakeholders will undoubtedly continue to have different goals when using irregular migration data and will therefore continue to use different definitions to some extent, but by communicating clearly about which definition is being used and why, other actors will be better able to assess and use data for their own purposes.

Beyond the clarification of definitions, increased consistency of definitions across countries and stakeholders would help make data more comparable. The European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, for example, has tried to combat definitional inconsistency by switching from using Member State-provided data to using Frontex data to monitor trends in irregular migration. However, Frontex still depends on data provided by Member States, somewhat limiting the impact of this switch.⁵⁰ The European Union could champion a clear and consistent definition of irregular migration and promote its uptake across Member States and their institutions, such as by leveraging the European Migration Network to develop more harmonised definitions and measurement methodologies.

Lastly, the sharing of irregular migration data sometimes looks like the children's game 'telephone', at

each link in the chain some information may get lost or misinterpreted. To avoid these issues, data should be released with an easy-to-understand and easily accessible data manual that includes not only the definition of irregular migration used in a dataset, but also information on whether the data represent precise population counts versus estimates, warnings for possible misinterpretations (e.g., on why three irregular border crossings do not necessarily equate to three irregular migrants), and a note on data quality.

Investing in building key actors' capacity to collect and use irregular migration data and in broader data literacy

To tackle skill and expertise gaps and improve data literacy, actors that collect and use irregular migration data require access to training, opportunities for mutual learning, and financial resources to invest in these activities. High-quality training materials are a first, important part of filling these knowledge gaps. For example, the handbook being developed by the MlrreM project, in addition to clarifying definitions, plans to provide resources on how to improve data quality and aims to increase awareness of existing data quality issues. Online training videos could also be an efficient way to make learning resources available to a wider audience.

Communities of practice are another way to build skills and knowledge, notably by fostering more informal mutual learning and knowledge-sharing between stakeholders in the field of irregular migration. This is crucial for building a collective knowledge base that transcends national and stakeholder silos, and it would also contribute to more trusting and effective institutional relationships. Existing platforms such as the European Migration Network, which brings together national-level European policymakers, and the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), a grassroots organisation with 164 member organisations,

could play an important role in facilitating such exchanges, though it would also be worth creating platforms that bridge the gaps between different types of stakeholders. EU Member States, research organisations, and NGOs could pool resources to support the creation of such communities of practice, along with the development and dissemination of training resources and expert knowledge.

Yet, training and knowledge sharing, on their own, may not be enough. In some contexts, there is simply a lack of funding to ensure that an organisation has the staff capacity to tap into data resources, as was highlighted by participants in the MlrreM workshop in Poland.⁵¹ Sufficient financial resources are crucial to hiring, training, and allocating staff to collect new and leverage available data. This can be part of a vicious cycle. As long as data gaps and data quality issues prevent the effective use of irregular migration data, the benefits of building capacity to effectively collect and use such data remain limited, which disincentivises governments from investing in more staff capacity. This, in turn, limits the quality and availability of irregular migration data. Breaking this cycle is imperative in order to advance the field and facilitate more evidence-based policy responses.

Scaling up local efforts to fill data gaps and improve understanding of the characteristics of irregular migrant populations

Among the many persistent gaps in irregular migration data, there is a particular lack of information on the profiles and circumstances of irregular migrants and key subgroups, data that would make it possible to better adapt the provision of essential services and improve outreach to this population (e.g., for counselling on return or regularisation options). Valuable lessons can be learnt from efforts undertaken at the local and municipal levels to counteract these shortcomings and promote more effective service provision, yielding far-reaching benefits not only for irregular migrants but for the societies in which they live.

Many of these initiatives stand out because they take a pragmatic approach to engaging with persons staying in a country irregularly. Municipalities are often on the front lines of addressing the needs of irregular migrants and engage directly with this population through efforts to address issues such as public health and homelessness. For instance, the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands has taken a proactive approach by working with local NGOs to provide irregular migrants with cards that give them access to health care. As a result, the city now has a relatively comprehensive overview of its irregular migrant population as well as more detailed data about their medical needs, which is particularly useful for public-health monitoring, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵² In Belgium and France, the EU-funded Reach Out project has piloted a new approach by working locally with a network of cities and civil-society organisations to reach irregular migrants in transit with counselling services. In its first phase, the project team established 3,500 counselling meetings in Brussels, Calais, and Dunkirk and worked to create a better understanding of irregular migrants' movements in the region.⁵³ In Spain, the *padrón municipal de habitantes* (municipal register of inhabitants) is an example of a proactive policy that allows residents to register irrespective of their immigration status and that can help facilitate access to social services (see Box 2 for details). In addition, by comparing *padrón* records and the number of residence permits issued, it is possible to estimate the irregular migrant stock in Spain.⁵⁴

National and EU-wide initiatives can learn from these locally tested approaches and support efforts to scale up those that are successful. In doing so, national governments could play an important part by helping to establish standardised frameworks for collecting and sharing information, to ensure consistency in data collected across projects and geographies.

BOX 2**Spain's *padrón municipal de habitantes***

The Spanish *padrón municipal de habitantes* (municipal register of inhabitants) is an example of a registration system that promotes inclusion and facilitates the collection of data on irregular migrants present in municipalities across the country. All inhabitants have a duty to register with the *padrón*, which gives them access to municipal resources and public services regardless of immigration status. The only requirements for registration are that an individual provide a form of identification and an address, and even these requirements can be flexible. The systematic nature of the *padrón* and the way it is separated from other policy functions (such as immigration enforcement) is unique in Europe, and it enables the country to collect valuable information about all of its residents, including their age, countries of origin, nationality, gender, and family/marital information.

Public trust in the register is facilitated by the work of civil-society and nongovernmental organisations that inform migrants about both the need to register and the benefits of doing so. Once registered, migrants have access to social services, including language courses, sport classes, libraries, education, some emergency social benefits, and health care. Municipalities can use these data in combination with data collected about the uptake of services to allocate resources accordingly. The greatest benefit to irregular migrants of registering in the *padrón* system is that they can obtain legal residence—*arraigo social*—if they provide proof that they have lived in Spain for at least three years.

The *padrón* system has, however, faced some challenges. A first major challenge relates to the considerable variation in different municipalities' documentation requirements for registration. For example, the city of Barcelona encourages irregular migrants to register even if they have no fixed address, with city officials making on-the-ground visits to confirm the residence and location of individuals unable to provide proof of address. And in Madrid, the City Council has established agreements with civil-society organisations at whose offices homeless people can register through the Neighbourhood Cards initiative. In contrast, municipalities such as Badalona require migrants to have both proof of a fixed address and a residence permit, and Ceuta and Melilla refuse to register irregular migrants altogether. Questions have also been raised about the reliability of the *padrón* data, and specifically the extent to which irregular migrants and other residents de-register when they leave the country, because municipalities have an incentive to overestimate how many inhabitants they have in order to receive more resource appropriations for services. Spain has tried to address these issues through legislation that removes the names of individuals who have left municipalities and that harmonises registration processes, but questions about data reliability remain.

Sources: Inmaculada Serrano Sanguilinda et al., 'Surveying Immigrants in Southern Europe: Spanish and Italian Strategies in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Migration Studies* 5, no. 17 (3 November 2017); University of Oxford, Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS), *City Responses to Irregular Migrants* (Barcelona: COMPAS, 2014); Claudia Finotelli and Sebastian Rinken, 'A Pragmatic Bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System', *Migration Information Source*, 18 April 2023; Carmen González-Enríquez, *Undocumented Migration: Counting the Uncountable. Data and Trends across Europe* (N.p.: CLANDESTINO Project, 2009); Nicola Delvino, *European Cities and Migrants with Irregular Status: Municipal Initiatives for the Inclusion of Irregular Migrants in the Provision of Services* (Oxford: COMPAS, 2017); Belén Fernández-Suárez and Keina Espiñeira, 'The Role of the "Cities for Change" in Protecting the Rights of Irregular Migrants in Spain', *Urban Planning* 6, no. 2 (27 April 2021): 56–67.

Strengthening data privacy safeguards when improving interoperability between databases

In the interviews and workshops conducted for this project, public authorities called for linking up da-

tabases and enhancing the interoperability of data systems related to irregular migration. By linking disparate data sources, authorised users could access more data and construct a more comprehensive and accurate picture of migration patterns, demographics, and needs. Furthermore, improved interopera-

bility could enable the real-time exchange of data, which could enhance these systems and policymakers' responsiveness to emerging challenges related to irregular migration.

Yet, making existing data systems interoperable often introduces new data privacy risks and means that data collected for one purpose would be used for new purposes. This would violate certain legal principles, such as the GDPR's 'purpose limitation' (the principle prohibiting the processing of personal data beyond what is strictly needed to achieve the purpose for which data were initially collected).⁵⁵ As such, the limited efforts in this area to date have been widely criticized. The European Union, for example, has adopted an interoperability framework that aims to make existing and new migration-related databases interoperable,⁵⁶ streamlining and ensuring EU agency and Member State authority access to data through the European Search Portal. These efforts have received considerable criticism from both NGOs and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights for lacking sufficient safeguards to ensure adequate protection of sensitive data stored in these systems, such as data on applicants for international protection in Eurodac.⁵⁷ This example highlights the need for EU Member States and other entities considering investments in interoperability to ensure the protection of data subjects' fundamental rights by establishing sufficient safeguards and to guarantee adherence to the principle of purpose limitation.

4 Final Reflections

Data on irregular migration comprise a complex landscape with many actors, purposes, and gaps and with both opportunities and obstacles for better policymaking. While advancements in data collection and new legislative tools, such as the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, offer avenues for en-

hancing understanding of irregular migration and formulating better policy responses, significant hurdles and risks remain. Persistent data gaps, varying definitions of key terminology, and inconsistencies across data sources highlight the need for more harmonised approaches and improved data practices. On the other hand, more data collection and sharing may result in mission creep, which could infringe on the rights of irregular migrants.

While the increasing availability of data provides hope for more evidence-informed policymaking, it will remain essential to approach data use with care and safeguards.

Addressing these challenges could involve several starting points, as this policy brief has highlighted. It may involve, for example, harmonising definitions, investing in capacity building and data literacy, strengthening local-level data collection, and separating data collection from law enforcement functions. Additionally, efforts to improve the interoperability of data systems—with proper safeguards in place—and to formalise data-sharing agreements could help enhance the accessibility and reliability of irregular migration data.

Ultimately, while the increasing availability of data provides hope for more evidence-informed policymaking, it will remain essential to approach data use with care and safeguards. Recognising the limitations of current data and managing data users' expectations will be critical to efforts to ensure that data serve as a tool for constructive dialogue and effective policy development, rather than a source of misinformation, fearmongering, and human rights violations.

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