



MIRREM

Measuring Irregular Migration

www.irregularmigration.eu

Resources for Journalists: Key Findings on Irregular Migration

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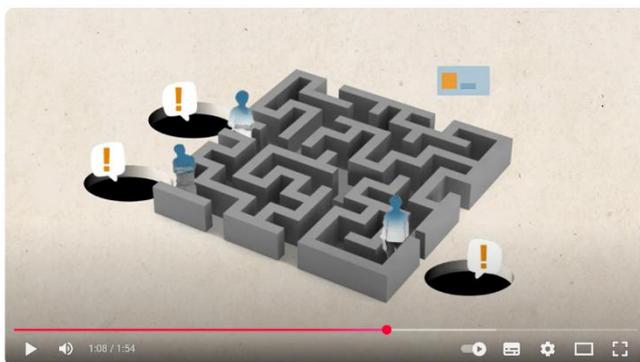


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1. DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Who is an irregular migrant?



Who is an irregular migrant?

parents and inherit this precarious residence status.

Watch our [animation](#).

Irregular migrants are people whose residence is not recognised by the country they live in. They are unable to obtain a residence permit or citizenship because of restrictive migration and residence policies. Many have had residence permissions linked to employment, study, family, or international protection, but those permits were either temporary or very precarious and their validity expired. There are also children who are born to undocumented

Notes on how to talk about irregular migration

- **Use accurate and respectful language:** Say *undocumented* or *irregular*, not *illegal*; avoid militaristic terms like *invasion* or terms used for natural disasters like *flood*.
 - **Centre migrants' voices:** Let people tell their own stories, not only governments, law enforcement or officials.
 - **Provide context:** Explain structural drivers of migration, as well as how laws and policies create situations of 'irregularity'.
 - **Acknowledge residence permit precarity:** People often lose their residence status for reasons beyond their control, such as administrative barriers, restrictive policies, or changes in employment.
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- **Avoid stereotypes and sensationalism:** Do not frame migration solely in terms of crime, security or crisis.
- **Choose imagery carefully:** Use visuals that reflect dignity and humanity, rather than spectacle or dehumanisation.
- **Protect privacy and safety:** Do not expose individuals or groups to risks of stigmatisation, retaliation, or legal consequences.
- **Highlight contributions:** Show social, cultural, civic and economic roles of migrants.
- **Include local perspectives:** Show both migrants' everyday realities and the responses of host communities, avoiding polarising 'us vs. them' framings.
- **Consider intersectionality:** Recognise how gender, age, race, class, or sexuality shape the lived experiences of migrants.

For more on terms and definitions, see: Chapter 2: What is irregular migration? by Albert Kraler, Tuba Birca and Ann Singleton in the [Handbook on Irregular Migration Data](#) (MirreM 2025)

Resources on the role of disinformation, discourse construction, media impact on migration and effective framing strategies:

Disinformation and media framing shape perceptions of irregular migration, highlighting the need for accurate, responsible reporting. Various stakeholders – including journalists, policymakers, academics and civil society actors – play a role in shaping and responding to these narratives.

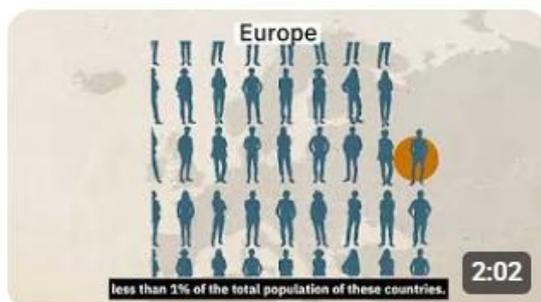
Chapter 4 on Stakeholders by Imanol Legarda in the [Handbook on Regularisation Policies](#) (MirreM 2025)

2. MEASURING IRREGULAR MIGRATION

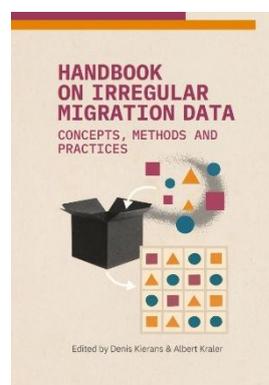
Estimates

What is an estimate: Available data on irregular migration is limited, fragmented and methodologically diverse. Therefore, the most reliable approach is to produce an ‘estimate’, expressed as a minimum and a maximum range, rather than a precise figure. The MirreM research project compiles various existing estimates and evaluates their quality to get a clearer picture of the number of irregular migrants residing in the 20 countries in Europe, North Africa and North America covered by the project.

For further reading on data literacy, see: [Towards the More Effective Use of Irregular Migration Data in Policymaking](#), by Jasmijn Slootjes and Ravenna Sohst (MirreM, 2024)



How to measure the irregular migrant population



Check the [handbook on irregular migration data](#) for more on measurement and practices, including pilot methodologies.

Watch our [animation](#).

The irregular migrant population in Europe has remained stable in recent decades

- Between 2016 and 2023, 2.6 to 3.2 million irregular migrants are estimated to have been living in the 12 European countries (including the UK) covered by the MirreM project.

- Estimates across these European countries put the share of irregular migrants at less than 1% of the total population
- Overall, the [MirreM Working Paper The Irregular Migrant Population of Europe](#) suggests no definitive change in the number and share of the irregular migrant population in Europe since 2008 – contrary to a public narrative of a continuous rise of irregular migration.

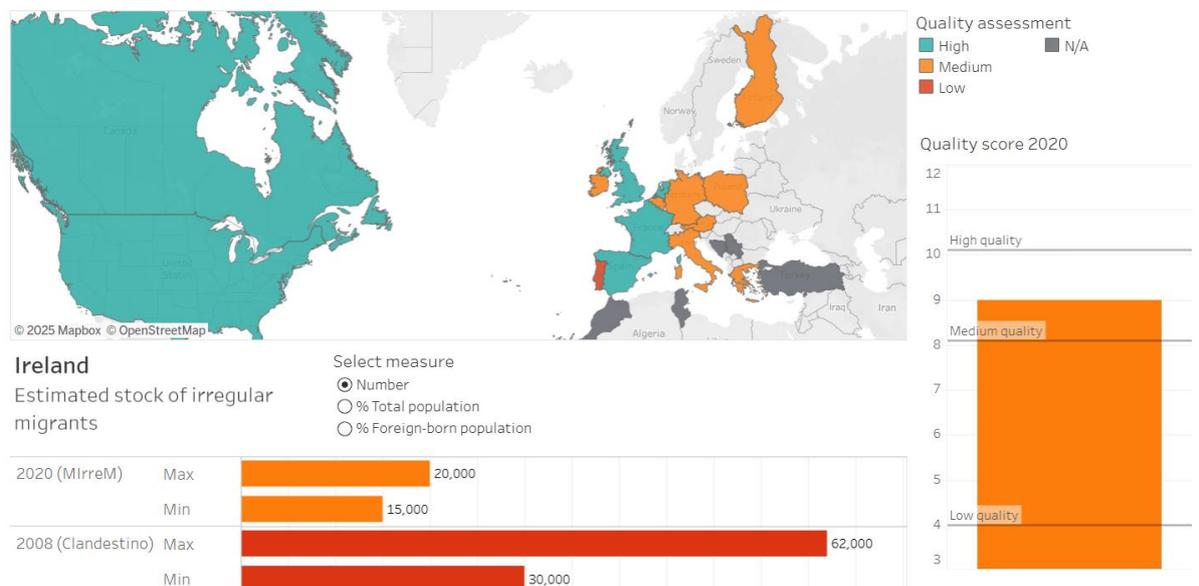
Check the [press release](#) on the launch of the MirreM database for further information.

Data portal on irregular migration stocks

The [interactive map](#) below presents the **most recent irregular migration population estimates** of at least medium quality in different countries since 2008. These estimates were compiled and their quality was assessed as part of the MirreM project. Where available, these estimates are displayed alongside Clandestino project benchmark estimates from 2008. Individual country pages containing all estimates compiled by the MirreM project, including top line findings and links to related publications.

The MirreM Public Data Portal on Irregular Migration Stocks

Hover and click on the countries and other objects below to explore the data



3. REGULARISATION POLICIES

Regularising the status of irregular migrants has benefits that extend beyond the individuals concerned. For migrants, it provides security of residence, access to rights, and opportunities to participate fully in society.

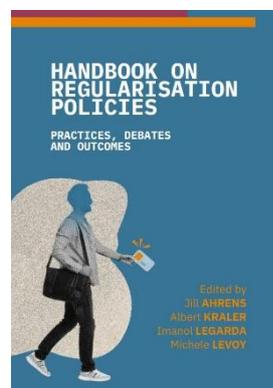
For host communities, regularisation reduces labour market exploitation, increases tax and social security contributions, and supports fair competition for employers. It also improves public health and safety by ensuring that all residents can access services and are not forced into precarious or informal arrangements.

At the societal level, regularisation strengthens social cohesion and integration, while giving governments better oversight and governance of migration. Far from being a one-sided measure, regularisation creates mutual gains for migrants, economies, and communities alike.

[Regularisations in Europe and North America: Comparative Reflections on Societal Challenges and Benefits](#) by Maristella Cacciapaglia et al. (MirreM 2025)



Why regularisation benefits everyone



Check the [handbook](#) on regularisation policies for practices, debates and outcomes.

Watch our [animation](#)

There is no evidence for a ‘pull effect’ of regularisation policies

Opponents of regularisation policies often refer to a potential ‘pull effect’, arguing that regularisation policies may encourage further irregular migration. However, case studies in Southern Europe and the United States suggest that migration flows are shaped primarily by economic conditions and social networks, rather than by the availability of regularisation policies.

[Working Paper on Migration Responses to \(Non-\) Enforcement](#) by Mathias Czaika, Jiancheng Gu, Albert Kraler and Lydia Rössl (FAiR, 2024)

Chapter 8: Regularisation in today's political context by Imanol Legarda in the [Handbook on Regularisation Policies](#) (MirreM, 2025)

Impacts and outcomes

Regularisation has demonstrable social, economic, legal and political impacts, but outcomes depend on policy design and wider framework of migration governance. We distinguish between ongoing regularisation mechanisms and time-limited regularisation programmes.

- Insecure, conditional or employer-dependent residence statuses can limit the effectiveness and durability of regularisation measures.
- Both intended and unintended consequences should be systematically monitored – including effects on labour markets, the protection of migrant rights, and long-term integration trajectories – and regularisation policies should be adapted accordingly.
- Regularisation policies operate within broader political, social, and international contexts, which shape both their feasibility and their outcomes.

Time-limited regularisation programmes demonstrate how rapid responses can prevent irregularity, but they carry risks when they are short-term or there are no pathways towards durable residence permits.

4. RETURNS

Using the return rate to measure effectiveness of return policy is deeply flawed and creates an unwarranted pressure for restrictions

The claim that only 20% of return decisions are implemented is widespread in political discourse at the [EU](#) and [national](#) level. But calculating the return rate as the ratio between return decisions and confirmed returns in a given year is deeply flawed and potentially misleading:

Issues with counting return decisions:

- Statistics on return decisions also include cases where migrants hold a residence status in another Member State, or are able to obtain a residence status and are transferred ('readmitted') under EU rules such as the Dublin III Regulation to another Member State. According to a European Parliament briefing, this accounts for approximately 20% of cases.
- In some Member States, an individual migrant may receive multiple return decisions if apprehended several times in the same year, according to the same EP briefing.
- In certain Member States, return decisions may also be issued to asylum applicants while their procedure is still ongoing.
- A considerable number of return decisions are not enforceable, either because they are issued only pro-forma as a formal step without an intention of execution, or because their enforcement is (temporarily) suspended (e.g. *Duldung* in Germany).
- When aggregated at the EU level, statistics may double-count individuals who have been issued multiple return decisions in multiple Member States.

Issues with counting returns carried out:

- There is no systematic EU-wide recording of how many mandatory returns are carried out following the issuance of a 'return decision' (obligation to leave the territory).
- The number of 'effective returns' in a given year often includes return decisions issued in previous years, not solely the current year.
- Migrants may also opt to return by themselves without reporting this to the authorities.

[EU Policy Framework on irregular migrants](#) by Martin Wagner, Alan Desmond and Albert Kraler (MIRREM 2024)

Video: [Who is an irregular migrant?](#) (MirreM 2025)

[Measuring irregular migration and returns in the EU](#) by Costica Dumbrava (European Parliament Think Tank 2025)

The return of irregular migrants ordered to leave mainly happens within the first two years after a return decision

Enforcement of return and regularisation are often understood as opposite options. In reality, however, these two pathways out of irregularity happen at different times. A recent German study shows that the likelihood of resolving irregular status is highest within the first two years after the obligation to leave becomes enforceable. After this period, the likelihood of voluntary departure remains almost stable, only increasing minimally and leaving regularisation as the only viable pathway out of irregularity.

[Return or regularization? A temporal analysis of rejected asylum seekers in Germany](#) by Laura Peitz (EUI Working Paper 2025)

4. UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

The MirreM Final Conference brought together leading international migration researchers, EU policy-makers, representatives of national administrations and civil society to discuss key findings about irregular migration and regularisation policies.

Click on the links below to watch the panel discussions.



[PANEL 1: Measuring irregular migration](#)

How many migrants are living without regular status?

What are the current data gaps?

Which innovative methodologies are emerging?

Chair: Tuba Bircan, Professor, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Speakers:

- Alejandra Rodríguez Sánchez, Postdoctoral Research Scholar, University of Potsdam
- Fabian Bach, Team Leader, Eurostat
- Amparo González Ferrer, Deputy Director General of the Reception System at the Secretary of State for Migration, Spain
- Ann Singleton, Reader in Migration Policy, University of Bristol, and external advisor to IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre



PANEL 2: Policy responses to irregular migration

What are examples of promising practices towards individuals remaining in the country despite return orders?

Which trends are emerging in the current political climate?

How can fundamental rights be properly safeguarded within a return-focused approach?

Chair: Anna Triandafyllidou, Professor, Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration, Toronto Metropolitan University

Speakers:

- Maegan Hendow, Senior Researcher, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
- Blanca Garcés Mascareñas, Senior Research Fellow, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)
- Mauro Gagliardi, Cabinet of European Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration Magnus Brunner



PANEL 3: The impact of regularisation policies

Is there any evidence of a so-called “pull effect”?

Can regularisation be a more effective alternative to return?

How can countries benefit from regularisation policies and programs – economically and socially?

Chair: Laetitia Van der Vennet, Senior Advocacy Officer for Children, Family and Youth and Regularisation, PICUM

Speakers:

- Albert Kraler, Assistant Professor and MirreM Project Leader, Department for Migration and Globalisation, Universität für Weiterbildung Krems
- Ana Damas de Matos, Economist, International Migration Division, Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, OECD
- Laura Peitz, Researcher German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)
- Brigitte Gremaud, Centre de Contact Suisses-Immigrés (CCSI), Switzerland
- Rosita Fibbi, Centre de Contact Suisses-Immigrés (CCSI), Switzerland

MIRREM PUBLICATIONS AND RESOURCES

Below is a selection of key resources produced by MirreM researchers throughout the duration of the project.

Handbooks:

- [Handbook on Irregular Migration Data: Concepts, Methods and Practices](#)
- [Handbook on Regularisation Policies: Practices, Debates and Outcomes](#)

Researching irregular migration:

- [Conceptualising migrant irregularity for measurement purposes](#)

Estimates of irregular migration:

- [Local-level indicators and estimates](#)
- [Public database on irregular migration flow estimates and indicators](#)
- [Public database on irregular migration stock estimates](#) ([press release](#) + [data portal](#))

Methods to estimate irregular migration

- [Review of traditional and innovative methods](#)
- [Mortality data](#)
- [Air passenger data](#)
- [Social media surveys](#)
- [Machine learning](#)
- [GP registrations \(UK\)](#)
- [Labour force surveys \(Türkiye, UK\)](#)

Policy frameworks on irregular migration:

- [National Laws and Policies](#)
- [Local Level Laws and Policies](#)
- [EU Policy Framework](#)

Country case studies:

- [Belgium](#)
- [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)
- [Canada](#)
- [Finland](#)

- [France](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Greece](#)
- [Ireland](#)
- [Italy](#)
- [Morocco](#)
- [Netherlands](#)
- [Poland](#)
- [Portugal](#)
- [Serbia](#)
- [Spain](#)
- [Tunisia](#)
- [Türkiye](#)
- [UK](#)
- [USA](#)

Comparative analysis of regularisation policies:

- [Regularisations in Europe and North America: Comparative Reflections on Societal Challenges and Benefits](#)

THE MIRREM PROJECT

MirreM examines estimates and statistical indicators on the irregular migrant population in Europe as well as related policies, including the regularisation of migrants in irregular situations.

MirreM analyses policies defining migrant irregularity, stakeholders' data needs and usage, and assesses existing estimates and statistical indicators on irregular migration in the countries under study and at the EU level. Using several coordinated pilots, the project develops new and innovative methods for measuring irregular migration and explores if and how these instruments can be applied in other socio-economic or institutional contexts. Based on a broad mapping of regularisation practices in the EU as well as detailed case studies, MirreM will develop 'regularisation scenarios' to better understand conditions under which regularisation should be considered as a policy option. Together with expert groups that will be set up on irregular migration data and regularisation, respectively, the project will synthesise findings into a Handbook on data on irregular migration and a Handbook on pathways out of irregularity. The project's research covers 20 countries, including 12 EU countries and the United Kingdom.

More information on the project is available at <http://irregularmigration.eu>.

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