

MirreM Data Collection – Country Context

ITALY

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Questions and answers:

1. What is your overall assessment of the quality of irregular migration data in your country?

The overall data quality assessment on irregular migration in Italy cannot be satisfactory (medium-low quality). An ‘improvable’ amount of data is publicly available and electronically accessible with no permissions required, but elaborations are mainly unexplained – to be taken for granted.

Unavailable raw data, especially from singular data sources, incomplete documentation (or even missing as in some cases concerning asylum), and undetailed methodological choices characterize, in fact, many estimates and indicators concerning irregular migration in Italy, both directly (as in the case of regularization policies and their applications) and indirectly (for instance, regular entries possibly leading to overstays).

Undetailed or incomplete documentation (e.g. methodology)

2. How is irregular migration data generally used in policy making?

Unlike stereotypes and manipulations finalized to electoral gains in policy and public discourses, accurate data estimates on irregular migrations are rarely considered strategic for policy making. Other factors (e.g., politics) hence influence policy development in Italy. Indeed, experts report the incorrect use of data by policy makers. More precisely, in the case of the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multi-Ethnicity (Orim), they notice policymakers’ discourses were challenged by the elaborated estimates, since they were distant from their rhetoric.

“Especially in recent years, I sensed a growing discomfort, particularly among certain political factions within the administration because the results we presented didn't align with the narratives they were pushing. Perhaps they wished that the irregular migration phenomenon was more significant. In my personal opinion, some of the research findings were not helpful and may have even hindered certain narratives. But it wasn't just the politicians who were displeased; certain associations working with specific immigrant populations also wanted different data that would favor their objectives and be more useful for advancing their activities.”

(IT_Exp_02)

Another example brings back to 2019, when the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini declared a certain increase in the number of irregular immigrants in Italy, associating them with sea arrivals. The announced data did not properly correspond to those analyzed by experts, thus creating controversies and debates on data measurement methods as well as the political and electoral uses that were being made of it.¹

Furthermore, policymakers show more attention towards other kind of data, especially GDPs, other economic statistics, or innovation trends, apart from electoral preferences and opinions.

“It is data on migration, not GDP, financial investments, innovations. They are interested much more in economic trends than in migration.”
(IT_Exp_01)

3. How did you go about the data collection process?

Our data collection processes firstly focused on publicly available and electronically accessible data, including data on indirect phenomena affecting irregular migration (e.g., VISA and tourism data). Secondly, we interviewed experts from institutions, organizations, and academia who usually collect and analyse that data. Finally, we invited the same experts to a seminar at the University to share their experiences, learn from others, and engage in discussions, as well as to connect with other experts, union representatives, members of associations, and policy makers.

4. Were there any specific difficulties you experienced during this process? How did you address them?

Institutions (e.g., police, statistical offices) that could have released further data or shared important insights (e.g., use of data in policy development) refused to be interviewed on this topic, both explicitly (by declaring that “we have nothing to do with irregular migrants”) and implicitly (by ignoring our requests). We considered it as a research outcome rather than a limitation of the study.

5. What were the main gaps in the evidence base (i.e., unmet user needs) that emerged during your data collection process?

Mainly, these following gaps emerged: missing or unfocused uncomprehensive data on irregular migration; limited documentation on it (e.g., methodology); narrow use of it in policy development.

Institutions have not been filling these gaps. For instance, the Ministry of the Interior only releases some of its available data, without widely illustrating the methodology. Non-institutional experts and organizations get then involved in such a data collection and

¹ <https://www.ismu.org/chiarimenti-numero-immigrati-irregolari/>

elaboration, expressing then their interest to share results publicly. Nevertheless, while the IRPSS Institute, the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), and in particular the ISMU Foundation serve as prominent examples, they are few in number and lament the lack of interest in their data by policymakers, leading to underutilization or misuse according to them.

Specifically, in the Lombardy region, where a significant population of irregular migrants resides in Italy, the ISMU Foundation has been contributing to monitoring activities of the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multi-Ethnicity (Orim) for over two decades. Their goal is to generate a diverse set of raw data and indicators for studying the characteristics of the migratory phenomenon, including irregular migrants. Unfortunately, the lack of interest from policymakers has resulted in the discontinuation of this valuable activity. Additionally, according to one interviewed expert, funding has further represented a problem: *“We have also observed a reallocation of funds, moving away from pure research and more towards something that is directly channeled into actions, or a research-action approach. These surveys were also costly because the interviews were conducted in the field, not over the phone, which incurred high expenses.”*

6. Were there any meetings with producers or users of irregular migration estimates and indicators that you were unable to secure, but sense that endeavouring to do so in future may be worthwhile? If so, please provide contact information for this person/entity and explain why you think such detail would be helpful.

Cinzia Conti, who works at ISTAT, the official statistical agency of Italy, responsible for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating statistical information about the country's demographics, economy, and society. However, at a later stage, she got in contact with us and agreed to share data. We are also organizing a seminar with her, to be held in the following months at the University of Milan.

7. Please point to an example of good practice estimating irregular migration and/or making use of estimates of irregular migration in policy-making that you came across. Why did you select this example?

We gave much attention to ISMU Foundation and other experts organizations which have been trying to fill the gaps here concerned – more generally, enrich research and policy development.

In principle, indirect methods are used by these actors to estimate the total foreign population: regular and irregular, resident and non-resident. Several institutional sources of data (population census, registries, residence permits, procedures, applications to regularization measures, etc.) are analyzed and compared, assuming that thematic and circumscribed data sources provide a broader view of the categories surveyed and indirectly a generalization mechanism.

More precisely, several attempts are made to estimate the phenomenon's actual magnitude, employing different methods and hypotheses. Five different classes of methods are used:

- Juxtaposition and comparison of data from different autonomous sources;
- Indirect methods;
- Results of regularization procedures;
- Rational estimates based on experience and the author's knowledge;
- Illegality ratio determined from sample surveys.

At the same time, the need to carry out representative sample surveys that also consider the non-resident component led to the empirical testing of solutions that are usually adopted for elusive populations and the identification of new data collection strategies. The so-called "center sampling technique" represents the most important proposal.

As explained in the CLANDESTINO report, a regular survey of both regular and irregular immigrants in the Italian city of Milan has been carried out by the Foundation ISMU since the early 1990s. In 2001 the survey was extended to the Italian region of Lombardy and the monitoring activity consolidated in a new Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity. The annual survey encompasses interviews with 8 000 migrants (since 2006: 9 000 migrants) and provides a detailed picture of the life and work conditions of both regular and irregular migrants in the Lombardia region. The survey technique applied by ISMU is the so-called centre sampling technique, or the so-called "Blangiardo method" which aims to arrive at a random sample of the universe of regular and irregular migrants residing in the sampling region. The basic rationale and assumption of the technique is that each foreigner in the sampled area at the time of the survey by necessity keeps a set of contacts with one or more centres or gathering places located in that area (migrant institutions, places of worship, health care, entertainment, meeting places, etc.). Once a sufficiently wide set of "centres" is identified any foreigner could be described by his list of contacts with various centres (one or more centres frequented). This information is then derived from the interviews with migrants contacted at various centres. Questioning the interviewees for all the meeting places/centres frequented by them, a matrix of all such centres visited by each interviewee can be drawn up. As the total number and characteristics of (regular and irregular) migrants is not known in advance, the sample cannot randomly draw migrants. However, once all the centres in the sampling area are known the centres can be selected randomly (with replacement) and then within each centre interviewees can be chosen among the persons frequenting it. To make the sample representative two statistical adjustments are carried out. First, the number of interviews in a certain centre will depend on its size, with smaller centres given a smaller probability to be chosen than larger ones. Second, after each interview the responding migrant is assigned a profile of all the centres she or he frequents. His or her probability of inclusion is higher, the higher the number of centres frequented and the lower the number of people frequenting each centre. Thus, each individual receives a weighting coefficient that corrects for this probability so that the weighted sample has the same representativeness as a random sample and the share, characteristics and size of the irregular resident population can be calculated.