

MirreM Data Collection – Country Context

UK

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Instructions:

Reflecting on your deskwork and fieldwork, please provide a brief snapshot (1 – 3 pages in total) of the overall picture of irregular migration data in your country. For each question, please address stocks, flows and indicators (or indicate N/A).

Questions:

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

For flows, the overall quality of irregular migration data in the UK is high. The number and types of indicators generated (primarily by the Home Office) has increased significantly – certainly since the Clandestino project, and even over the last few years, as small boat arrivals have become a significant policy issue (more on that below). Again speaking in broad strokes, the documentation of what is largely administrative data coming out of the Home Office is of good quality and steadily improving, as is access to these data. To say a bit more on this: even when considering data that have been available for a long time (e.g. since the 2000s), typically they have been improved in terms of:

- More detailed and more clearly flagged explanatory notes and methods, such as definitions, changes to methodology, limitations, etc.
- Improved access to the data. Although there are still exceptions to this, Home Office Immigration Statistics are typically located in one place, with the most recent release clearly labelled, and lead clear descriptive analysis and charts (rather than just offering tables to download).

Note that I did not find any evidence of irregular migration flow estimates available to the public. Although I was told there are such estimates/forecasts to support Home Office operations and planning needs they are not available to the public. The above refers to indicators only.

There are a handful of stock estimates, helpfully outlined in these Migration Observatory briefings, [Irregular Migration in the UK](#) (see Figure 2 especially) and [Recent estimates of the UK's irregular migrant population](#).

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

As you can see from the indicator assessments I sent in, flow data are cited in a range of political settings, such as parliamentary questions and inquiries and policy statements. Frequently, journalists and politicians refer to them in the public debate – in newspapers, over radio and TV, and on social media platforms.

While figures are used in these settings, they do not appear to be a part of, or come from, an evidence base on which policies are made. Rather, actors on all sides of the debate use these

data in different ways to bolster their own policy positions and, for those in power, justify the policies they implement.

Flow estimates – N/A

Where stock estimates are available, they are at time cited in policy contexts (e.g. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-07-19/debates/C87C5848-DF11-4B03-90FE-39FA245CB12D/AmnestyForUndocumentedMigrants>, though here wrongly attributed to JCWI) to bolster a case for policy change. In this case, grappling with the proposition for a regularisation programme during Covid-19. In the above case, as in many others, issues we grapple with in the MIREM project are deployed to complicate and ultimately discredit the irregular migration estimates as a policy tool:

“It might be helpful if I set out some of the background on the issue we have been debating today. First, it should be noted that the definition and coverage of this group is complex: the term “undocumented migrants” often interchanges with “illegal” or “irregular” migrants. As evidenced in this debate, it can include illegal entrants, who have perhaps arrived in the back of a lorry; overstayers who have stayed beyond the term of their visa; failed asylum seekers whose claims have been declined; those not adhering to the conditions of their stay; and even those who remain in the UK without status, but whose situation is temporary and who intend to leave in short order. For today, I will include all of those groups in our definition.

Secondly, there is no current, reliable and accurate estimate of the number of those without status who are resident in the UK. As my shadow, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), touched on, the last official Government estimate was made in the mid-2000s, when the population was believed to be around 430,000. In 2009, a report by the London School of Economics estimated that the number of irregular migrants was around 618,000. An obvious part of the problem in formulating an accurate estimate is not just calculating and agreeing on the different groups this population involves but the fact that, for obvious reasons, many of them will not come into contact with the Home Office or make their presence known here in the UK.”

Finally, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has alleged that the Home Office has little knowledge of the size or impact of the irregular migrant population in the UK, instead relying on “anecdote, assumption and prejudice” to make policy (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2020).

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

Desk review, past knowledge, a workshop with data producers, and follow up conversations.

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

N/A

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

As already discussed, there are far more flow indicators in the UK – this is probably the case everywhere. It may be that building on these relatively abundant and reliable data could help

to meet the need for timely, localised data about specific groups (e.g. for local councils and their partners).

Understanding the typical paths towards irregularity. Using the data to diagnose these paths. No need for exact numbers necessarily, ratios and proportions are also helpful. Longitudinal data is needed.

Data collection should not itself undermine the progression of people through the immigration system. More resourcing and/or better systems for collection of information and processing should be identified and rectified as quickly as possible.

Linking datasets across government departments can help to shine a light on sub-groups and provide a 'journey' over time, but this is a resource intensive exercise – it comes with significant ethical and practical considerations.

There are many data needs that remain unmet and it is unclear who is responsible for meeting them. To name a few:

- Data on irregular migrants AND people with temporary status (those whose status is precarious)
 - The sheer number of people on the territory – a good start for gathering data,
 - Geographical dispersion
 - Social conditions
 - Disaggregate data for undocumented population – the sub-groups
 - Data on migrant skills – to be able to demonstrate how migrants add to the cities, to their local economies
 - We don't have much data on demographic flows. Data on children born in irregularity – no such data. Belgium is an exception but it's mostly estimates.
 - Useful to have data not just on estimates, but also cost benefit analysis research
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.

Yes – feel free to ask if you'd like me to put you in touch with anyone!

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?

The Greater London Authority (GLA) have a central insight team that is able to access, analyse and produce internal reports from raw Home Office data on various topics for different departments and teams within GLA. The GLA's Migration Team is able to bid for the central insight team's time to research and provide evidence on specific topics, such as homelessness, irregularity, migrant destitution, and (seemingly in connection with their economics team) produce analysis not only on estimates but cost-benefit analyses as well.

I chose this example because it shows how local actors can leverage existing relationships across departments and with other partners to more effectively act and – in the case of the cost-benefit analysis – make the case for policy change. This is particularly important when the national policy context around irregular migration is negative and/or calcified.