

## MIRreM Press Release: New Database and Report Assess Key Estimates of Irregular Migrants

Migration researchers from the world's leading universities and research organisations have released a new public database which brings together and assesses the latest estimates of how many migrants with irregular migration status live in various European countries and North America.

The MIRreM project, a collaboration between 18 institutions,<sup>1</sup> including the University of Oxford, which led on this aspect of the work, officially launched a new database of irregular migrant population estimates, [the MIRreM Public Database on Irregular Migration Stock Estimates](#) ('the Database'). A new MIRreM Working Paper [The Irregular Migrant Population of Europe](#) presents an analysis of the Database.

Measuring populations of irregular migrants can be complicated as fears and risks around immigration enforcement prevent many members of these communities from sharing personal information in surveys, censuses and other data gathering processes that typically allow statisticians to calculate population sizes and composition. As such, all data covering this subject is inherently uncertain and comes with large margins of error.

However, the Database substantially updates previous assessments of the irregular migrant population in Europe, such as the estimates by the [Clandestino research project](#) dating back to 2008 and a subsequent [study by the Pew Research Centre](#) from 2019. MIRreM thereby offers essential new estimates, after a prolonged period of transformations in the European migration landscape. The Database also incorporates estimates of the United States' irregular migrant population.

For more information on the potential and pitfalls of using irregular migration data, including key takeaways for policymakers, see the MIRreM Policy Brief [How fit is the available data on irregular migration for policymaking?](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Complutense University Madrid, European University Institute, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E), Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migration (PICUM), Toronto Metropolitan University, University for Continuing Education Krems, University of Leicester, University of Maastricht, University of Milan, University of Osnabrück, University of Oxford, University of Potsdam, University of Turku, University of Warsaw, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Key findings include:

- 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.
- 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.
- Estimates across these European countries put the share of irregular migrants at less than 1% of the total population and between 8% and 10% of the population that was born in countries outside of the Schengen Area (for EU countries) and the Common Travel Area (for Ireland and the UK). This is roughly in line with findings from the Clandestino research project.
- [In 2008, Clandestino](#) estimated the irregular migrant population of these 12 countries at 1.8m to 3.8m. The MIrreM project increases the low estimate by 780,000 and decreases the high estimate by 460,000, creating a clearer picture of the total irregular migrant population. Nevertheless, this still leaves a significant range in which changes in the irregular migrant population since 2008 cannot be discerned.
- There are significant differences in irregular migrant populations at the national level amongst the countries studied by MIrreM:
  - The United States has the largest estimated irregular migrant population in terms of absolute numbers (one estimate in the MIrreM Database, which we assessed as high quality, puts it between 11.1 million and 11.6 million) and as a share of its total and foreign-born populations.
  - Finland has the smallest estimated irregular migrant population in terms of its size and its share of the total and foreign-born populations amongst the countries we covered.
  - Compared to 2008 estimates, research from MIrreM indicates that:
    - In three countries, the new estimates suggest greater numbers: Austria, Germany and Spain.
    - In five countries, the estimated irregular migrant population remained the same: Belgium, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States.
    - In five countries, it declined: Finland, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Poland.
- MIrreM is developing and testing new methodological approaches to facilitate the production of more regular and robust estimates on the irregular migrant population. Still, European investment in long-term, cross-country work on irregular migration data is needed to draw more reliable conclusions. For example, estimates for the UK and Germany – thought to have the largest irregular migrant populations in Europe – are significantly out of date.

Country	MIrreM quality assessment (H=High, M=Medium, L=Low, N/A=Not Applicable)	Estimates of the Irregular Migrant Population		As % of total population		As % of the population born in countries outside of free movement protocols (third-country nationals in the EU)		Year
		Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max	
Austria	H	62,000	62,000	0.7%	0.7%	5.6%	5.6%	2022
Belgium	M	112,000	112,000	1.0%	1.0%	11.4%	11.4%	2017
Finland	M	700	5,000	<0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	1.5%	2020
France	H	200,000	300,000	0.3%	0.4%	3.4%	5.1%	2017
Germany	H	600,000	700,000	0.7%	0.8%	8.3%	9.6%	2017
Greece	M	100,000	200,000	0.9%	1.9%	11.0%	22.1%	2017
Ireland	M	15,000	20,000	0.3%	0.4%	6.4%	8.5%	2020
Italy	M	458,000	458,000	0.8%	0.8%	9.4%	9.4%	2023
Netherlands	H	23,000	58,000	0.1%	0.3%	1.4%	3.6%	2018
Poland	M	6,000	48,000	<0.1%	0.1%	1.2%	9.9%	2019
Spain	H	391,000	469,000	0.8%	1.0%	8.5%	10.2%	2019
UK	H	594,000	745,000	0.9%	1.1%	10.5%	13.1%	2017
12 European countries	N/A	2,560,000	3,180,000	0.6%	0.8%	7.5%	9.4%	2016 - 2023
US	H	11,080,000	11,620,000	3.3%	3.5%	24.0%	25.4%	2022

## QUOTES:

**Michele LeVoy, Director of the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM):** “Estimating how many people are living in an irregular situation in Europe must be used to design inclusive policies that grant access to public services for this marginalised population, and that offer them pathways out of irregularity. Undocumented people are already part and parcel of our societies and it’s high time that Europe recognised this.”

**Denis Kierans, Senior Researcher at the University of Oxford’s Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS):** “Our estimates indicate there were between 2.6 and 3.2 million irregular migrants living in 12 European countries (including the UK) between 2016 and 2023.”

“While this is a big number, put in context it represents less than 1% of the total population of these countries and between 8% and 10% of residents born in countries outside of European free movement arrangements – the EU and Schengen zone for EU countries and the Common Travel Area for the UK and Ireland.”

“Overall, the irregular migrant population across the European countries we studied does not appear to have definitively changed since 2008.”

“However, there is significant variation at the national level, with some countries seeing increases, others decreases and still others witnessing no definitive change.”

**Albert Kraler, MIrreM project Coordinator and Assistant Professor in Migration Studies, University for Continuing Education - Danube University Krems:** “Numbers never speak for themselves. They always require critical inquiry. The MIrreM database not only compiles different recent estimates, but also provides the necessary information to assess their quality and what they actually try to measure.”

### **NOTES TO THE EDITORS:**

- Media requests can be sent to Denis Kierans ([denis.kierans@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:denis.kierans@compas.ox.ac.uk) - lead author of the Database and the accompanying report) and Gianluca Cesaro ([gianluca.cesaro@picum.org](mailto:gianluca.cesaro@picum.org)).
- Sources for every estimate are included in [the Database and further explanations are provided in the README file](#).
- Researchers assessed each estimate’s overall quality (H=High; M=Medium; L=Low) based on the following criteria:
  - o Accessibility: is the data publicly available?
  - o Documentation: is there documentation about data and methods?
  - o Reliability: does the analysis include reliability indicators (e.g. range), with limitations specified?
  - o Methodology: is it adequate and comprehensive?
  - o Data: what are the biases and assumptions?
- In using the estimates provided in this press release and Database, we ask you to also review MIrreM Policy Brief [How fit is the available data on irregular migration for policymaking?](#) to learn more about the limitations and care required in citing these numbers.
- The MIrreM project is funded by the European Union and receives co-funding from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration (TMU).
- A MIrreM [Working Paper](#) published in April 2024 gathers local-level estimates of the irregular migrant population from several European cities, including Amsterdam (between 10,000 and 25,000 people), London (397,000 people), and Milan (43,000 people).
- More information about the MIrreM project can be found on <https://irregularmigration.eu/>
- If you are interested to receive further updates on MIrreM’s work, you can sign-up to the MIrreM newsletter at <https://irregularmigration.us21.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=7acd770a03889ec52823f4e19&id=6979ad5bb1>