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Clandestino: counting the uncountable: data and trends across Europe: irregular migration in the U.K.

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Publication date

2009

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Düvell, F., & Vollmer, B. (2009). *Clandestino: counting the uncountable: data and trends across Europe: irregular migration in the U.K.* (Findings Research Project Outcomes). Centre on Migration, Policy and Society. http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/pdfs/Findings/F-09-12_Clandestino%20findings.pdf

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Clandestino - Counting the Uncountable: Data and Trends across Europe - Irregular Migration in the U.K.

Synopsis

In the UK, the term 'irregular migration' tends to refer to people that are seen as having entered the country illegally. In a wider discursive context, other terms are commonly used such as: 'unlawful', 'unauthorised', 'undocumented'. Definitional problems are just one part of this complex phenomenon, that is hard to pin down in terms of its scope, nature, surrounding discourses and state responses. This project forms part of a larger study that analyses irregular migration in 12 EU and 3 non-EU (transit) countries and responds to the need for further clarification of this complicated and difficult issue. First, it has critically explored sources of data and estimates of irregular migration and, in particular, the validity and reliability of the data and methods used in their production. Second, it analysed pathways into irregularity, such as the reasons for, and ways in which, migrants become irregular. Third, it analysed policies and discourses ('number games') on irregular migration and addresses certain misconceptions. Finally, it has developed ethical guidelines for the research of irregular migration.

Pathways

- Irregular migration refers to a still elusive and increasingly complex legal term which includes irregular entry, residence and/or employment. In legal or judicial terms such people are denoted as 'illegal entrants' in the UK, even where their initial entry into the country was legitimate.
- Most fundamentally, an 'illegal entrant' is a person who: 1) unlawfully enters or seeks to enter in breach of the immigration laws or of a (previous) deportation order to 2) enters or seeks to enter by means which include deception by another person. There are numerous other types of violations of the immigration regulations that can lead to irregular migration: from clandestine border crossing, breaching one's 'leave to enter' to 'means of deception' including 'silent deception'.
- The majority of irregular migrants actually enter the country legally, and seemingly subsequently slip into irregular status. The most common forms are working longer hours/in other or additional jobs than permitted, working without permission, and/or 'overstaying' the expiry date of their visa or as otherwise authorised by their 'leave to enter'.
- A minority enter clandestinely. Nevertheless, the dominant and perhaps misleading image of a 'clandestine intruder' irregularly crossing a border from France or Belgium to the UK, pervades throughout much of the political discourse, tabloid headlines and enforcement agency rhetoric. Figures are often exaggerated as, for instance, repeated attempts by one and the same individual are double counted.
- The category of 'absconded' asylum seeker might be treated as a special group of concern, since an 'assumed' ongoing residence in the country may not justify categorising this group as 'illegal entrants'.
- EU accession of A8 and A2 countries has meant that large numbers of previously irregular immigrants from these countries were regularised overnight and can now move freely within the EU.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

Figures

- Estimates and guesstimates of irregular migration in Europe are often used freely and uncritically by experts, journalists and policy makers without it being made clear who produced them first, how, and for which purpose.
- Official data associated with the term 'illegal entrant', such as enforcement figures, are incomplete and scattered, though improvements are announced.
- Most figures in political and public discourse can be evaluated as guesswork, are highly politicised and are often grossly exaggerated.
- In particular UK estimations on irregular migrant populations are limited. The Woodbridge study (2005), commissioned by the Home Office offers the most reliable estimation currently available. It is the only attempt that utilises a satisfactory methodology. It suggested that the irregular migrant population in the UK in April 2001 was 430,000 (based on a range of 310,000 and 570,000). This central estimate equals 0.7 per cent of the total UK population (59 mio.) and 11.8 per cent of the UK total foreign-born population. A more recent estimate given by the London School of Economics and based on the Woodbridge survey suggests a figure of 725,000 irregular immigrants in 2009.
- Data and research regarding proportions of nationalities or gender among the irregular migrant population in the UK are extremely rare and only tentative indications are available.

Policy Impact and Discourse

- The past four years have been characterised by an increase of protectionist immigration legislation. Structural reform of the Home Office, enhanced internal surveillance and control and newly initiated police operations epitomise a principle shift in this policy domain from a previously liberal approach to a tough enforcement ethos.
- The nature of politics nourished a mostly inaccurate and negative image of irregular migrants. Both policy-makers and the media often seem insensitive to the problems associated with oversimplifying the phenomenon of irregular migration. Sources of numbers may not be clear though they are routinely used as a means of arousing public anxiety about migration and exercising pressure for policy responses.
- Justifying enforcement agencies' activities, irregular migration is increasingly reduced to the phenomenon of 'human smuggling'. Political struggle and enforcement activities are seemingly fitted into a discourse that is dominated by the 'insecurity of the unknown', i.e. that the 'real' number might be 'well-above' the estimated number. A traditional UK political culture of refraining from quantification of the phenomenon, and the UK's tentative liberal values in this particular policy combine into a policy discourse that is increasingly tuned towards a fight against 'human smuggling'; consequently the domain is dominated by a discursive 'criminalising' effect.

Methods

The research mainly employed desk research involving collecting and evaluating estimates and data. Various publications were collected, ranging from Hansard to NGO publications, think tank papers, press articles to standard publication in academia. Individual in-depth interviews with the UK Border Agency were also held. Awareness of ethical issues that may arise in conducting research in such as sensitive field was taken into account throughout all research practices.

Outputs and key findings

For the full version of the Clandestino report on the UK please visit: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/clandestino_report_united-kingdom_final_2.pdf

For further details and findings produced by the Clandestino research consortium, please visit: <http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/> and <http://irregular-migration.hwwi.net/>

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