



Actors Interviewed:

- Civil society: NGOs, trade unions, migrants' organizations: 15
- Media: 1
- Governmental representatives: 1
- Academics: 2

1. DESCRIPTION OF WORK AND TARGET GROUP

Policy Brief:

"Data and research regarding main nationalities among the irregular migrant population in the UK are extremely rare and only tentative indications are available. For example, detention centres produce data that rank their populations by nationality. Between 2001 and 2006, significant numbers were from Jamaica, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, Turkey and India (in descending order). Qualitative research projects conducted on detention centre populations indicate that the population tends to be male dominated and that majority is between 25-29 years old. However, these small-scale samples are taken from a very specific group and are not representative for the total of the irregular migrant population". (p. 2)

"Due to the under-researched nature of this field, a well-founded position on the size, demographic features and composition of the irregular migrant population cannot be given". (p. 2)



Photo: Street Musicians in London © Giulia Mule

According to the interviewees, the majority of undocumented migrants entering the country are men though women represent a significant number. Some amongst the respondents (NGOs in particular, a researcher and a former governmental representative) believed that both genders have an equal share in the overall percentage. A member of an NGO pointed out that many children live marginalized and are also detained. Two

respondents were not capable of providing any answer.

A representative of a trade union stressed that 70% of the members of this trade union are female regular migrants. A respondent underlined that gender varies across the different sectors migrants work for, whereas another interviewee added that children, elderly as well as people who have been trafficked should be also taken into account. Another feedback came from a Filipino organisation according to which Filipino women employed in the domestic and services' sectors represent 90% of the undocumented migrants that the organization deals with.

***Terminology.** The majority used the terms "irregular" or "undocumented". The term "clandestine" has also been employed. It seems that most of the interviewees tend to utilize "irregular" while when associated with "illegal entry" only few of them made use of the word "illegal".

Policy Brief:

"There are various types of violations of the immigration regulations that can lead to an irregular migration situation". (p. 3)

"A common breach of conditions is that of working in violation of employment restrictions". (p. 3)

"Another common breach of the conditions of 'leave to enter' is not leaving the country by the expiry date of the visa and instead overstaying". (p. 3)

2. ESTIMATES, DATA, ASSESSMENT OF SIZE AND COMPOSITION OF THE IRREGULAR MIGRANTS' POPULATION

Policy Brief:

"Instead, the reality is that the majority of migrants overtly enter the UK but slip into irregularity at a later stage of their stay. A special group of irregular residents is asylum seekers who discontinue to register at the given reporting centre and who are assumed to be still residing in the UK (so called 'absconded asylum seekers')".

(p. 3)

Pathways into Irregularity

Irregular migrants seek from NGOs general and legal advice, information, employment and education (e.g. working training sessions, English courses, etc). In the UK, NGOs, Migrants' associations and Trade Unions mainly focus on policy work through campaigns and information, drop-in sessions in order to raise awareness amongst both migrants and the civil society. On the other hand, charities and religious associations provide direct assistance, housing and food.

The majority of the interviewees (NGOs, trade unions, researchers) felt that visa overstay is the most common pathway into irregularity; the denial of refugee status is perceived at the same time as an important pathway by ten respondents (among the NGOs). All respondents agreed that only a small minority of migrants enter the country irregularly.

Moreover, two respondents mentioned that migrants turn out to be undocumented because they have been trafficked while two other interviewees remarked that often migrants become undocumented because they are dependents of a regular migrant who lost their visa due to family breakdown and/or another similar reason. The latter two pathways, though, do not represent a significant percentage.

Flows of Undocumented Migrants Coming to the UK

Ten interviewees amid the NGOs felt that the total yearly number of irregular migrants is increasing; four (a trade union, a representative of an NGO, a researcher and a journalist) argued that it might be decreasing because immigration rules are becoming stricter whereas only one respondent believed it is steady. According to an interviewee, the number of undocumented migrants coming to the UK fluctuates in relation to the economic conditions (e.g. if the economy is strong, the number increases) and varies proportionally to specific ethnic groups. The current situation does not seem stable for a trade union representative; he noted that regardless of the increase of protectionist immigration legislation, people carry on entering the country due to the miserable conditions they face in their countries of origin. Two more interviewees hesitated to reply to the question.

Numbers of Undocumented Migrants Receiving Assistance from Organizations

It is difficult to provide exact figures regarding the number of undocumented migrants receiving assistance by the organisations interviewed. Often NGOs are not sure how many undocumented migrants they provide assistance to, mainly because they are not interested in knowing their legal status. Nevertheless, it seems that the migrants' country of origin is frequently demanded. According to a trade union, one worker out of ten recruited by the trade union is a migrant. An NGO representative pointed out that fifteen undocumented migrants are supported by her association every week. Another one noted that 20% of the 570 migrants who received assistance from June 2008 to November 2008 were undocumented. According to another respondent, over 500 out of the 1,700 people assisted by her organization per year are undocumented.

Figures and Percentages of Undocumented Migrants Living in a Given Geographical Area (London)

Estimating the total population of undocumented migrants in the working region of the interviewees is difficult. According to a member of a trade union, only guesstimates could be envisaged while a representative of an NGO believed that it may be feasible to calculate their number by taking into account a large margin of error. Some other respondents stated that since the status of migrants is not a strict requirement to which their NGOs refer to, their number remains vague and unattainable.

- A former governmental representative noted that approximately 12% of the migrants who currently reside in London are undocumented.
- A freelance journalist believed that there are 80,000 to 90,000 Chinese undocumented migrants living in London; however, she stressed that this figure remains a rough attempt.

- According to an additional respondent, recent estimates for the number of undocumented migrants in the UK suggest a figure of 750,000 people in the region, of whom two-thirds, or 500,000 people, live in the London area. The predominance of London as a region for irregular migration is explained both by the size of its refugee population, including those whose status under the Geneva Convention has not been acknowledged by the Home Office, and also by the size of its informal labour market.
- According to a researcher, , 53% of the 423 Brazilians who took part in a research study declared themselves as undocumented.
- According to figures provided by the Mayor's office, 400,000 undocumented migrants reside in London.
- Moreover, an interviewee indicated that 72% of 131 Ukrainian migrants (which roughly corresponds to eight out of ten) who came into contact with his organisation in London, had certain irregularities as regards their immigration status or were undocumented.

Estimates of Undocumented Migrants in the UK

Policy Brief:

"The most reliable estimate suggested that the irregular migrant population in the UK in April 2001 was 430,000 (based on a range of 310,000 to 570,000). This central estimate equals 0.7 per cent of the total UK population (59 million) and 11.8 per cent of the UK total foreign-born population in 2001". (p. 2)

"The Woodbridge study (2005) is the only formal attempt of estimating a number of irregular immigrants in the UK, which used the dataset of the 2001 Population Census. It offers the most reliable estimation currently available. It is the only attempt that utilises a satisfactory methodology". (p. 2)

Although providing estimates is not considered feasible due to lack of reliable data, some 'guess estimates' were pointed out by the following interviewees.

- A journalist noted that 150,000 is the number of undocumented Chinese migrants living across the UK; however, she was not confident about the accuracy of this figure.
- A respondent pointed out that recent estimates for the number of undocumented migrants in the UK suggest a figure of 750,000 people in the region.
- According to a researcher, and within the framework of his study, it is possible to deduce that there are 200,000 Brazilians living irregularly in the UK.
- Another interviewee thought that approximately 350,000 might be the overall number of undocumented migrants.
- Although according to a Filipino organization there is no clear number of undocumented Filipino migrants in the UK, an estimate of 50,000 has been reported without specifying its source.
- It is worth mentioning that two trade union representatives estimated that there are approximately 500,000 undocumented migrants in the UK.

From the above, it is clear that the estimates given vary not only in terms of total size of undocumented migrants in the UK but also as regards the nationality breakdown of undocumented migrants.

A Ukrainian respondent underlined that calculating how many irregular Ukrainians live in the UK is not feasible due to the changing status and the different conditions under which they apply for visa. An NGO representative stressed that not having reliable data could not only lead to lack of accuracy but also to the misuse and exploitation of these figures, leaving the political debate open to alarmist discourse or justification of enforcement measures.



Photo: Playing an Old Gramophone in the Streets of London ©

Assessment Regarding Estimates and Views on their Reliability

Policy Brief:

"Estimates on irregular migrant population in the UK are limited. Most figures to be found in discourses can be evaluated at guesswork, underlie highly politicised forces and are often grossly exaggerated. Some of them are pure guesswork and others lack an appropriate demonstration of their methodology". (p. 2)

Most of the interviewees believed that reliable data constitute a useful base upon which policies could be drafted. According to one respondent, data are a starting point. "It is unlikely to put a strong case without figures. Nevertheless, in order to guarantee their proper use we have to make sure that numbers will not be exploited by journalists and policy makers", she added. An NGO representative maintains that clear-cut numbers are necessary to support the regularization campaign, steadily affirm migrants' rights as well as affect policies through harder lobbying. "Estimates should provide an answer on how to become regular", she was further quoted. A respondent believed that politicians could exploit figures hence mislead the public opinion; at the same time he acknowledged that figures represent a proof to rely on for planning hence implementing legislation in the field. Another NGO highlighted that data would make people aware of the real situation on the ground; however, he noted that local authorities should be capable of making their own assessment with regard to irregular migrants.

On the other hand, according to an interviewee, data would not make any difference due to their lack of reliability. "Figures are wild estimates based on guess estimates", he was quoted. He believed that statistics are useful on a local level if produced by NGOs whereas on a macro policy level numbers are important in order to provide qualitative information. One more respondent was concerned about their impact given the fact that figures exist but are exploited by politicians; for this reason, the political discourse should be critically analysed. An interviewee expressed his doubts regarding the accuracy of data since migration faces serious lack of reliable statistics while a researcher assessed that trustworthy data could make the government regularize irregular migrants as well as grant amnesties.

A representative of an NGO believed that statistics are not particularly helpful even though they could show a global trend and be considered as a valuable indication over a set period of time. Identifying the processes through which people become undocumented should attract most attention instead; “a firm engagement of the civil society would be beneficial in order to put forward strategies to face irregular migration”, he added. Furthermore, a respondent stressed that there is an increasing concern regarding numbers amongst the populist politicians.

A journalist felt that people like and trust data although she is not in favor of them; besides, she stressed that it is more important to know the conditions migrants live in instead of their number. According to a respondent working for an NGO, reliable data could contribute to modify the current migration policy by providing politicians with an effective tool; she also noted that NGOs would lobby ‘harder’ if the number of undocumented migrants was high. Another academic stated that finding trustworthy figures is extremely rare. Regarding the ethical side of the matter, she believed it might be politically wrong since it could enhance sentiments of racism and xenophobia. Nevertheless, the same respondent pointed out that it is a politically correct choice if it contributes to the provision of services. “Relying on accurate estimates could boost cooperation amongst NGOs in order to further lobby and raise awareness on the issue”, a representative of an NGO argued.

To a member of a trade union, figures would be the best argument for regularization and would strengthen the ongoing campaign. A governmental representative believed that in the UK there are no reliable estimates but guesswork leading to a great risk of distortion. However, precise data could be helpful in order to better understand the effects and/or impacts of immigration policies, advice the government to assess the needs and set new resources as well as strategies for the sake of a better social policy. According to an interviewee, clear estimates would provide a degree of certainty for policy makers and create a public policy framework in order to raise awareness amongst the civil society.

3. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policy Brief:

“Flexible immigration regulations – A more flexible regime may also be considered. Regulations that lead into irregular status may need to be eased in their stringency and rigidity. Regulations offering a change of status, a change of purpose of stay or an extension of stay may potentially prevent the number of regular migrants slipping into an irregular status”. (p. 4)

State Policy Responses and their Implementation on the Ground: Examples of State Beneficial Policies Employed

Most interviewees stated that there are no state policies implemented on the ground that are beneficial to undocumented migrants; yet responses on the local level are

much more effective. Enforcement, detention, deportation and criminalization are the main policy responses of the UK government.

The majority amongst the respondents were very concerned about the effects of the current financial crisis on irregular migrants.

According to an NGO, valuing the contribution of migrants would be a significant step forward since the market they produce creates an important workforce supply upon which the UK economy, especially the informal one, relies. Another respondent stated that unfortunately undocumented migrants are not eligible for any support and increasingly face forced removal and destitution.

From another NGO, enforcement legislation is at the top of the political agenda. A researcher expressed her disappointment regarding the lack of political will regarding irregular migration, emphasizing that tightening up borders remains the main goal set by the UK government so far. "Very often migrants have to go to court to get their rights respected", an interviewee was quoted. He added that there is a public phone line with the aim of denouncing undocumented migrants.

All the interviewees agreed in saying that enforcement legislation is the only policy implemented so far; in fact, no other strategic plan is provided by the government apart from the denial of benefits to undocumented migrants.

The rise of xenophobia amongst British citizens is another issue to take into account; the argument was raised by a journalist and a representative of an NGO. An academic stated that the tighter the immigration controls become, the more the number of irregular migrants increases. "Patterns on migration are not changed by making the rules stricter", she added, stressing that criminalization of assistance, exploitation and racism reflect the bleak trend currently going on in the UK.

A respondent added that deportation and detention are the main measures the government focuses on.

However, the majority said that, when implemented, free education to be provided to children is the only beneficial state policy as undocumented children are entitled to go to school, be registered and attend classes regardless of the status of their parents. Unfortunately, free access to education is not always guaranteed. Access to health care is down to the discretion of general practitioners (GPs). However, it is a fact that, except for certain illnesses, most doctors treat people irrespective of their legal status. According to a member of a trade union, state services are at stake.

Moreover, some interviewees particularly amongst the NGOs, a researcher and a trade union representative are in favour of regularizations and in particular support the on going regularization campaign.

Majority amid the respondents (NGOs and the trade unions) are convinced that the civil society will tackle migration's issues by further strengthening their actions and lobbying.