

# Migration and Asylum Data for Policy-making in the European Union

## The problem with numbers

Ann Singleton

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### Abstract

The migration, humanitarian and policy crises in the European Union in 2015 and early 2016 have highlighted, among many other problems, a pressing need for reliable, timely and comparable statistical data on migration, asylum, and arrivals at national borders. In this fast-moving policy field, data production and the timeliness of dissemination have seen some improvements but the sources of data remain largely unchanged at national level. The policy demand for the most recently available data points to the need for a better understanding of their strengths and limitations.

This paper examines the reasons for some of the main problems with the data for policy and for public discussion. It makes a set of recommendations, calling for a complete and updated inventory of data sources and for an evaluation of the quality of data used for policy-making.



Societal  
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Network



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# Migration and Asylum Data for Policy-making in the European Union

## The problem with numbers

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### 1. Why are EU migration and asylum data so problematic, when the need is so great?

The migration, humanitarian and policy crises in the European Union during 2015 and early 2016 have highlighted, among all the other problems, a pressing need for reliable, timely and comparable statistical data on migration and asylum, as well as on arrivals at national borders. The problematic use of asylum data in policy has been discussed in an earlier paper in this series (Mouzourakis, 2014). Such data are needed to develop appropriate policies to deal with the crises, but also to monitor the effectiveness of the EU and national free movement and labour migration policies, and to monitor the extent to which authorities meet the Treaty and secondary legislative obligations in this field. The data are crucial not only to the implementation of national and EU-wide policy, but also as monitoring tools, and to inform public discussion. In this highly politicised field, analysing and understanding data is as much an art as a science.<sup>1</sup>

The statistical system for providing comparable asylum and migration statistics across the EU is, in many ways, more robust now than ever before, but significant gaps between immediate policy needs and data availability remain. This is important because both the authority and the legitimacy of policy decisions and actions are reinforced (or challenged) by use of the numbers. The timeliness of the availability of data is a major concern, yet the scramble for up-to-date figures can be at the expense of accuracy. This may be seen as unavoidable, as urgent situations demand an immediate response and decisions cannot wait for the necessary statistical checks on numbers. However, particularly in the search for policy evidence in public debate, the media and others frequently report data on migration incorrectly or inappropriately.

The main actors in this field, in relation to the EU, include Eurostat; the European Asylum Support Office (EASO); the International Organization for Migration (IOM); UNHCR; the EU External Borders Agency (Frontex).<sup>2</sup> A burgeoning industry of migration specialists; governments; think tanks and academic research centres provide commentary and analysis. All of these actors attempt to disseminate and/or analyse data in as timely a fashion as possible. They are all, however, generally dependent on the same set of national sources and some EU-wide operational data.

Official asylum statistics are supplied by member states to Eurostat, the responsible body for European Union statistics, while the agencies take responsibility for the management and dissemination of their operational and related data. Frontex now has the role formerly taken by the Centre for Information, Discussion and Exchange on the Crossing of Frontiers and Immigration (CIREFI) to collect EU-level enforcement data related to illegal immigration and trafficking.<sup>3</sup> This is the source of the border data cited by many media outlets. EASO also produces data for asylum operational and policy-related activities.

The focus of this paper is on the strengths and weaknesses of the current system for immediate policy concerns in the European Union and on possible steps to support improvements in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Mouzourakis (2014), “Wrong number? The Use and Misuse of Asylum Data in the European Union”, CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe No. 69, 4 December ([www.ceps.eu/publications/%E2%80%98wrong-number%E2%80%99-use-and-misuse-asylum-data-european-union](http://www.ceps.eu/publications/%E2%80%98wrong-number%E2%80%99-use-and-misuse-asylum-data-european-union)).

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, Frontex and EASO have agreements about the division of their relevant responsibilities for data.

<sup>3</sup> Council of the European Union (2010), Note from the Presidency: “New JHA working structures: Abolition of CIREFI and transfer of its activities to FRONTEX and the Working Party on Frontiers”, CIREFI 3, Front 19, COMIX 137. 6504/10, 22nd February ([www.europa-nu.nl/9353000/1/j4nvgs5kjpg27kof\\_j9vvj9idsj04xr6/vicz7mu5u6z3](http://www.europa-nu.nl/9353000/1/j4nvgs5kjpg27kof_j9vvj9idsj04xr6/vicz7mu5u6z3)).

## 2. Strengths and weaknesses

### 2.1 Eurostat: regional database with national data problems

The EU has, arguably, one of the best regional-level migration data systems in the world. The Eurostat database receives data from all 28 member states (and other EEA countries). The strength of the EU-wide migration and asylum data available from Eurostat is that they are collected under a regulatory framework and have become increasingly comparable (if not harmonised) in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Policy-makers, members of the public, journalists and civil society organisations are now able to access better quality, more comprehensive and more timely data directly from the improved Eurostat website.

The weakness for policy is that this is not a source for the latest data on the most recent events, which are the daily or weekly arrivals at the borders or the dynamics of current movements of people. The data also have many inherent problems, resulting from the variety of national sources, definitions, methods of collection and dissemination across the 28 member states. There are no other sources at EU level because the data are all products of the national migration and asylum systems.

The urgency of policy concerns cannot overcome the inevitable time-lags caused by the administration of the asylum process and the processing of the resulting data. Eurostat must publish the official corrected statistics from member states, albeit with ‘health warnings’, whereas UNHCR is also able to disseminate more recent provisional data.

### 2.2 UNHCR: caution about timely but provisional data

UNHCR urges caution in the use of the asylum figures it disseminates for Europe. It correctly points out that “The statistical picture of the number of people seeking international protection in Europe is partially distorted because of the reported instances of the same individual being registered as asylum seeker multiple times across the continent.” (UNHCR, 2015).<sup>5</sup> There is no systematic means of ensuring that asylum application data can be checked against each other for different reporting countries, as there is no way to link the data on individuals.

### 2.3 Discrepancies and incorrect use of data

The UN definition of migration, incorporating the concept of change of residence and a one-year time criterion, underpins Eurostat’s international migration dataset, but the term ‘migration’ is used in policy to refer to many other types of human mobility spanning different time periods. This is one cause of confusion in the media discussions. Another cause is the use of ‘migration’ as being synonymous with ‘arrival’; the two terms are frequently used interchangeably. Emigration or departure data are also very weak in most countries, so the picture is distorted by a lack of information on the characteristics and movements of people who leave a country. Flows, arrivals at the borders and asylum applications are also frequently conflated or analysed incorrectly in the media to produce total numbers. For current practical and policy reasons, it appears that policy-makers use a definition of migration that is closer to the one used by the IOM, being “the movement of a person or a group of persons across an international border, or within a State”. The term ‘arrivals’ might better be used to refer to the registered entry of migrants, on or after crossing a country’s border.

Administrative data and estimates are frequently used interchangeably to describe migration and refugee arrivals and flows. Border-crossing data have also been widely used (incorrectly) to represent the numbers of migrants. The terms ‘irregular’ and ‘illegal’ are used interchangeably. Frontex also does this itself, first in its explanation that “Frontex provides monthly data on the number of people detected at the external borders of the European Union. Irregular border crossings may be attempted by the same person several times in

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<sup>4</sup> Link to the Eurostat migration database (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/migration-and-citizenship-data>).

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2015), “Mid Year Trends 2015” ([www.unhcr.org/56701b969.html](http://www.unhcr.org/56701b969.html)).

different locations at the external border.”<sup>6</sup> A subsequent reference on the Frontex website is to the “number of detections of illegal border-crossing at the external borders of the European Union”, these being the same type of numbers, with the same health warning.<sup>7</sup>

Confusion is also caused by the collation of different numbers, from various sources, on the same or similar phenomena. Numbers representing different time periods are combined, resulting in double counting. Frontex border and operational data<sup>8</sup> are used widely in the media as arrivals or migration numbers; arrivals estimates at different borders are frequently combined to produce inflated total EU numbers;<sup>9</sup> asylum application numbers are often presented as stocks of resident refugees.

In the case of Germany, confusion has been widespread about the apparent discrepancies between estimates of arrivals, EASY registrations and asylum applications. The confusion was compounded by a general assumption that these three types of figures should represent the same phenomena. A data briefing produced by the IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre<sup>10</sup> (Singleton et al., 2016)<sup>11</sup> explains the differences between the EASY numbers and the asylum application data in 2015.<sup>12</sup> Apparent discrepancies can also be demonstrated in the following table, compiled from the official published data. The numbers of monthly first-time asylum applications are much lower than the EASY registration numbers, but this does not mean that there is a mistake caused by one source being ‘wrong’.

*Table 1. Monthly first-time asylum applications\* and EASY registrations in Germany, 2015*

|                                       | Jan   | Feb   | Mar   | Apr   | May   | Jun   | Jul   | Aug    | Sep    | Oct    | Nov    | Dec    |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| <b>First-time asylum applications</b> | 21679 | 22775 | 28681 | 24504 | 23758 | 32705 | 34384 | 33447  | 40487  | 52730  | 55950  | 46730  |
| <b>EASY registrations</b>             | 32229 | 38892 | 31091 | 33150 | 37194 | 53721 | 82798 | 104460 | 163772 | 181166 | 206101 | 127320 |

\* The BMI records subsequent corrections to the total number of applications as being an additional 24,069 for 2015.

Sources: Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI), IOM GMDAC.

In fact, the confusion appears to arise from a general lack of understanding that registration in the EASY system is not the initial stage in an asylum application, it is only the national system (implemented in each of the Laender) for registering an intention to apply for asylum at some point in the future.

## 2.4 Asylum data

Asylum data can also be confusing per se. Applications might be made on or just after arrival, or after some time in a country, so they do not represent the same movements as arrivals data. Numbers of applications can include first and subsequent, or repeat applications, and either individuals or cases (which might include dependants, i.e. more than one individual).

With the aim of overcoming these problems (among others) and in an attempt to harmonise the EU-wide figures, Eurostat collects (and makes available on its website) data from all the member states and reports on

<sup>6</sup> Frontex (12.15.2015), “Number of migrants arriving in Greece dropped by half in November” (<http://frontex.europa.eu/news/number-of-migrants-arriving-in-greece-dropped-by-half-in-november-cITv3V>).

<sup>7</sup> Frontex (22.02.2016), “Number of migrants arriving in Greece down 40% in January” (<http://frontex.europa.eu/news/number-of-migrants-arriving-in-greece-down-40-in-january-x3gZWu>).

<sup>8</sup> Frontex public reports (<http://frontex.europa.eu/publications/>).

<sup>9</sup> This was exposed in an online report by Nando Sigona, “Seeing double? How the EU miscounts migrants arriving at its borders”, 16 October 2015 (<https://theconversation.com/uk>).

<sup>10</sup> [www.gmdac.iom.int](http://www.gmdac.iom.int)

<sup>11</sup> A, Singleton, A. Carrasco-Heierman and D. Kierans (2016), “Migration, asylum and refugees in Germany: Understanding the data”, GMDAC Data Briefing Series, Issue No. 1, January.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 5.

first applications.<sup>13</sup> The strength of this collection is that it contains checked and corrected monthly data, broken down by citizenship, age and sex, providing evidence for analysis of recent historical trends. The database is accessible publicly and data can be downloaded for use. Asylum and migration statistical data collection has now become much more transparent. The weakness for policy is the time-lag between events and their accurate recording.

The application data become publicly available once they have been checked and corrected and become official statistics. This process can involve a delay for some member states, so the final-year data and the EU totals are not immediately available at the end of each year. As commentators wish to have more timely figures, provisional figures are often used, directly from national sources, to estimate the likely total numbers. These may enter the public domain and drive public debate, while subsequent corrections do not receive the same visibility.

*Characteristics of (and differences between) asylum application data and arrivals data*

| Asylum Application Data  | Arrivals Data   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An application can be made directly on arrival or in the following weeks or months (depending on the country).</li> <li>• May include first-time as well as subsequent applications.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Represent the registered entry of migrants into a country.</li> <li>• Do not imply that all those registered remain in the country.</li> </ul> |

During the next stages in the asylum process, as decisions are taken and appeals made against those decisions, the picture becomes more complex. If first-decision data are used, they do not represent the total sum of decisions. If one case results in several decisions, for example through the process of decision and appeal, then the number of decisions exceeds the number of cases.

## 2.5 Immediate policy needs take precedence over the effective monitoring of systems and over longer-term planning needs

An important part of the picture that is necessary to develop comprehensive migration policies (rather than just control of immigration policies) is missing from the statistics. This includes the unrecorded information that is needed to monitor the member states' observance of due process in the implementation of migration control policies, including compliance with the *acquis* and fundamental rights obligations. This would need to be the subject of another paper.

## 3. Recommendations

### 1. Update and continuously maintain inventories and evaluations of all sources and available data

Thorough inventories and evaluations of all the national data sources in the EU were conducted during the first decade of this century, under the aegis of two EU FP6-funded projects, which built on the earlier work of a series of projects: THESIM (completed in 2005)<sup>14</sup> and PROMINSTAT<sup>15</sup> (completed in 2010). These projects included important work on administrative data sources. It is perhaps time, a decade later, to revisit these project-based exercises, which involved a strong network of migration

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Eurostat (2015), "Asylum in the EU Member States More than 410 000 first time asylum seekers registered in the third quarter of 2015", Eurostat News release 217/2015, 10 December (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7105334/3-10122015-AP-EN.pdf/04886524-58f2-40e9-995d-d97520e62a0e>).

<sup>14</sup> Towards Harmonised European Statistics on Migration (THESIM) ([www.uclouvain.be/en-7823.html](http://www.uclouvain.be/en-7823.html)).

<sup>15</sup> Promoting Comparative Quantitative Research in the Field of Migration and Integration in Europe (PROMINSTAT) ([www.prominstat.eu/drupal/node/156](http://www.prominstat.eu/drupal/node/156)).

A. Kraler and D. Reichel (2010), "Statistics on Migration, Integration and Discrimination in Europe", PROMINSTAT Final Report, ICMPD, Vienna, June ([www.prominstat.eu/drupal/?q=system/files/PROMINSTAT\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.prominstat.eu/drupal/?q=system/files/PROMINSTAT_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)).



data experts and researchers across Europe. Since 2001 there has been a great deal of improvement in the availability of reliable statistical information on asylum and migration in the EU. The earlier mapping exercises now need to be revisited and the information in them updated so that a clear picture of the reliability and coverage of all the current sources can be made available.

**2. Conduct an evaluation of the quality and relevance of the available data for policy, research and public information**

In addition to the inventory and evaluation of data sources, a systematic evaluation is needed of the quality of the data and their use or relevance for statistical, research and policy purposes.

**3. Strengthen national data collection systems to capture hitherto unexploited administrative data**

In particular, data on changes of status and more detailed cohort and longitudinal information are needed. Policy-makers also need more than historical analysis (however recent). On a day-to-day basis, decisions are being taken in administrative systems on arrivals at the EU's external borders and on movements within the territories of member states. The data used for these purposes are collected directly from national sources and are generally not processed through statistical systems.

**4. Develop systematic data collection of socio-economic data to inform integration policy**

It may be that the cost of not collecting such data is now inhibiting the development of comprehensive and effective integration policies. The use of Europe-wide surveys such as the Labour Force Survey and EU-SILC (Statistics on Income and Living Standards),<sup>16</sup> together with small-scale surveys, the addition of migration modules or surveys to existing platforms, qualitative research, mixed methods and collaboration between academic researchers and NGOs should also be explored.

**5. Collect data to monitor the effectiveness of fair migration management and asylum systems**

The current emphasis on arrivals data concentrates the focus of policy on immigration control and prevention. However, there is also a gap in the data on actions and omissions of member states that result in their breaches of Treaty obligations towards people seeking protection on their territory. Anecdotal reports suggest that such breaches could be numerous across the EU and include the use of detention, administrative denial of access to health care, push-backs and 'hot returns', in which people are turned back without being allowed an opportunity to attempt to gain entry to a territory. Better monitoring of state practice, going beyond the information currently available, is needed to address these wider challenges.

**6. An updated and streamlined reporting and dissemination system**

This is needed to collect, process and disseminate public information (other than official statistics) to the member states, the European Commission, the European Parliament, EASO, citizens of the member states and 'stakeholders':

- first, implement common standards for statistical recording in all aspects of the asylum process;
- second, increase transparency, user feedback and responsiveness to user needs; and
- third, extend Eurostat's data collection to exploit more administrative data sources, for example visa statistics, to broaden the coverage of the asylum and migration databases.

<sup>16</sup> See (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions>).

Annex. Migration and asylum data problems

**Additional information is needed on the socio-economic context and the characteristics of migrants:** This would allow for more effective monitoring of the asylum process, but also of integration policies across the EU.

**Longitudinal and cohort data are missing:** The potential to monitor the effectiveness of national asylum systems is also hampered by the absence of longitudinal and cohort data. Longitudinal data and information on the entire asylum process are also needed, up to the point of return or at which a person otherwise leaves the system.

**Administrative data and partial coverage:** Administrative systems for asylum applications and decisions, residence permits, work permits and visas provide information that is useful and precise in terms of what is recorded, but by their nature do not capture the full picture of unrecorded migration asylum or migration events, in particular the movements of refugees or of migrant workers in the hidden economy.

**Transitions between statuses:** Better data are needed on transitions between all forms of asylum and migration status, including from one type of visa to another, on renewals or extensions of visas and the link (or loss of the need for visa status) with acquisition of citizenship.

**Dublin Regulation data:** The Dublin Regulation established a mechanism for EU member states to decide which state should be responsible for processing and determining the outcome of an application for asylum. However, because of problems of implementing this system, Dublin Regulation data provide only a very partial picture of the current situation. They also contain errors because of historical confusion amongst data suppliers over recording the decisions to take charge of or take back asylum-seekers. Also, in many member states potential asylum-seekers do not enter the asylum system at all, because an application will result in the person being fingerprinted, in which case the Dublin system means they would not be able to reach their destination country. Since the summer of 2015, in many cases the system has been inoperative because of political events, notably the effective suspension of ‘Dublin’ by Germany.

**Schengen data:** Visa systems are one possible source of migration data, and for the 22 countries operating Schengen systems there is a potentially comparable or harmonised type of data. However, as for any visa system, this could only provide information on the numbers of visas issued, not on the current location of individuals, or on the movements of people who have not used the visas issued to them. The spirit and intent of Article 13(5) of the Schengen Borders Code is not being honoured by member states. The Schengen Information System (SIS) is used to collect information for policing and operational reasons and is not a source of migration data.

**Denials of access to territory and procedures:** Information on access (or lack of access) to the asylum process is missing. Missing too are reliable and comprehensive statistics on ‘hot returns’ (usually at or near the border) of people who are not permitted to access a procedure in a member state, and illegal ‘push backs’ of people who are turned back before reaching a member state’s territory. Statistics are not shared on ‘transit’ documents issued in airport transit areas not deemed to be ‘national territory’, in which it may be extremely difficult or impossible in practice to claim asylum. There are only estimates of the numbers of people (in their hundreds of thousands) who are in need of protection, but cannot apply for asylum (or do not wish to, due to lack of prospects of obtaining protection), for example in Greece and Italy.

**Detention:** Information is not recorded at EU level on the detention of asylum-seekers. Thus there are no EU-wide data on: the grounds for detention of individual asylum-seekers; duration of detention; conditions, including the nature of detention facilities, standards of accommodation in detention, access to medical care, education, legal advice and other services. Individual member states do not generally make detailed information public. Following concerted action by a range of civil society actors, the UK, for example, has started to provide more public information, but the data are still incomplete. Silverman and Hajela (Feb. 2016) have observed:

information on the ethnic origins of the detainees is often difficult to determine. It is also difficult to track individual trajectories of detention, release and re-detention through the statistics because they are presented as separate numbers of occurrences. Such evidence gaps and limitations are important in discussions about how to access immigration detainees and provide them with services such as translation and visits.



**Removals:** Some data are collected at EU level on removals following an administrative decision to remove people irregularly present in member states (as set out in the revised Eurostat Guidelines), however there is no EU-level information about what happens to people after they are returned (notwithstanding the obligation under the Returns Directive for monitoring forced returns, in particular). In addition, statistics are not recorded on how many people are removed before asylum appeals are finalised, whether the people returned have been placed in danger, or whether they may have re-entered the EU. The human and financial cost of removing people should be justified, notably where EU funding and other support is involved, to ensure compliance with European and international standards.

**Grounds for rejections:** ‘Manifestly unfounded’ decisions – along with those rejected in accelerated procedures, inadmissibility processes or in border processes – are currently included in ‘all rejections’. A breakdown of the different categories of rejection, specifying the grounds on which the decision was made, as well as the type of procedure in which it was reached, would allow for greater scrutiny and transparency in this part of the asylum process.

**EU citizens** claiming asylum in another EU member state are often excluded from data collection, as it is not mandatory to supply these figures. The EU asylum *acquis* permits member states to reject such applicants as inadmissible or manifestly unfounded, although the statistics for some individual countries confirm that some EU nationals nevertheless do seek protection in other member states.

**Deaths of migrants:** There is no systematic collection of data by governments on the deaths of migrants. The IOM’s Missing Migrants Project (<http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>) has counted more than 40,000 (known) deaths of migrants since 2000. The first global report on deaths (Brian & Laczko, 2014), and a forthcoming second report to be published in early 2016 are the only global studies. The grim reality is that many deaths result from the actions and omissions of smugglers, from the failures of asylum systems and from the consequences of policies, or the acts and omissions of state authorities and others. This a significant data gap, as pointed out by Brian and Laczko (2014).<sup>17</sup> This remains the case in the EU, despite the fact that the 2009 Stockholm Programme set out the need to “‘record’ and ‘identify’ migrants trying to reach the EU” (Grant, 2011).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> T. Brian and F. Laczko (2014) (eds), *Fatal Journeys. Tracking Lives Lost during Migration*, IOM, Switzerland.

<sup>18</sup> S. Grant (2011), “Recording and identifying European frontier deaths”, *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 13:135-156.