

No One-Size-Fits-All

Outreach and counselling for irregular migrants

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Executive Summary

Irregular migration remains a pressing challenge for the European Union. Strategies to date have centred on preventing irregular entry via border management and returning those found to be staying irregularly within Member State territory. Heightened pressure on European governments to show results, however, has led policymakers and practitioners to consider other instruments, with a budding interest in outreach and counselling for irregular migrants living in or transiting through EU countries. Various actors have, unevenly, experimented with new methods to connect with this hard-to-reach population, particularly those who are not in contact with authorities, and to inform them about pathways out of irregularity—including assistance available to those who voluntarily return to their origin country, as well as in some cases options to regularise their status in the host country. Some initiatives take a broader approach, seeking to connect irregular migrants with essential services for which they are eligible, in part due to recognition that individuals have more capacity to plan for the future when their basic needs are met.

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The diversity of approaches in outreach and counselling—led by diverse stakeholders, targeting different groups, and with varying modes of operation—stems from the complex realities of irregular migration and fluctuating societal and political attention to this issue. The heterogeneity of irregular migrants (a group that includes people with a rejected asylum claim and a leave order, those who overstayed a visa, and unaccompanied minors, among others) has meant that many different actors have encountered or been mandated to work with this group. This includes national and local governments, civil-society organisations, and service providers, some of whom have adopted or developed strategies to connect and work with irregular migrants. Practices range from information provision via leaflets or posters, to setting up walk-in information centres, offering counselling services in emergency shelters, or running mobile outreach teams. Which tools are used and with which target audience reflects the—often very different—mandates of the organising entities. In turn, these varying target populations, approaches, and mandates, along with differences in case resolution options across Member States, often lead to a lack of coordination among stakeholders active in this space.

This patchwork of initiatives has led to uneven coverage and inconsistent results, with some groups overlooked while others are targeted by multiple, at

times overlapping, services. Addressing these issues is challenging not only because of the fragmented nature of the field and lack of stakeholder coordination but also the dearth of evidence on which strategies are most effective, for whom, and under what conditions. Some of the most pressing knowledge gaps relate to the sociodemographic characteristics, migration trajectories, and needs of irregular migrants overall and of key subgroups. Additionally, there is a lack of data on which practices are best suited for reaching different migrant profiles and for advancing different aims. Many factors contribute to these knowledge gaps, not least the difficulty of collecting data on a highly mobile population that often avoids contact with authorities, and the lack of common definitions in this field and of metrics for what constitutes ‘success’.

For outreach and counselling efforts to better reach their goals—whether rooted in migration management, migrant welfare, or other concerns—policy-makers and practitioners should prioritise investments in the following areas. First, improving data collection about the target population, including their demographics, migration motivations, and specific needs is essential to crafting tailored interventions for this diverse population. Pooling data from various stakeholders, with strict privacy protections in place, could help in this regard. Second, clarifying programmes’ goals, expected outcomes, and metrics of success and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks will be critical for documenting the impact of initiatives and upgrading systems or procedures. These efforts should also capture information on key aspects of service delivery to better understand how the design of services shapes their results. Lastly, fostering peer learning and collaboration among stakeholders, including both nongovernmental and government entities,

can facilitate the dissemination of best practices. By investing in these areas, the field can develop more humane and effective strategies that help countries address irregular migration and help irregular migrants navigate the often-challenging situations in which they find themselves.

BOX 1 Who are irregular migrants?

There is considerable variation in the terminology used to describe irregular migration and irregular migrants, including between country contexts and types of actors or institutions. Another common term is ‘undocumented’, as in the name of the Reaching Undocumented Migrants (RUM) project this study is part of.

According to the EU Return Directive, irregular migrants are non-EU citizens (i.e., third-country nationals) who are present in an EU Member State without meeting the conditions outlined in Article 5 of the Schengen Borders Code or other entry, stay, or residence requirements. This definition highlights the fact that there are various reasons someone may lack immigration status and, thus, be an irregular migrant. For example, they may enter an EU country without the necessary travel and entry documents, have an asylum claim rejected, overstay a visa, or lose their legal status (e.g., because they lose their job and hence their status as a labour migrant). Additionally, some non-EU citizens may have status in one Member State but travel through or settle in another without authorisation, at times with the intention of applying for asylum or moving elsewhere.

Sources: ‘Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on Common Standards and Procedures in Member States for Returning Illegally Staying Third-Country Nationals’, *Official Journal of the European Union* 2008 L348/98 (24 December 2008); International Organisation for Migration, ‘Key Migration Terms’, accessed 30 October 2024; Return and Reintegration Facility, ‘Reaching Undocumented Migrants’, accessed 30 October 2024.

1 Introduction

Tackling irregular migration to the European Union has been a priority for many years now, and it remains at the forefront of the EU agenda. Especially since the influx of mixed migration of irregular migrants and asylum seekers to the European Union in 2015–16, this topic has consistently shaped EU migration policies, fuelled political discussions, and captured public attention across Member States.¹ The strategies proposed and adopted for addressing this issue have evolved over time and encompass an increasingly diverse set of tools. These include strengthened border controls, voluntary and forced return efforts, new legal pathways to offer alternatives to irregular movement, and regularisation procedures.

More recently, EU countries have also sought to enhance outreach and counselling for specific groups of irregular migrants, for various reasons. These include return counselling, which aims to inform irregular migrants about return and reintegration support available for those who opt to voluntarily return to their origin country. In some contexts, outreach and counselling efforts have extended beyond a sole focus on return to emphasise pathways out of irregularity more broadly (including through asylum claims and regularisation options, where they exist) and other relevant topics, such as access to certain essential services. Behind these initiatives are various goals (related to migration management, public order, and migrant rights and welfare, among others) and an equally diverse set of actors, both within and outside governments.

As interest and investments in this area grow, so does the need for robust evidence to inform both policy development and programme operations. However, to date, the impact of outreach and counselling practices and the processes that underpin them are not well documented, making it challeng-

ing to assess their effectiveness and sustainability. Unpacking the field's varied motivations, stakeholders, and modes of operation will be essential to understanding the current patchwork of initiatives and to guiding progress in the future.

This issue brief takes a first step towards making sense of practices in the field of outreach and counselling for irregular migrants. As part of the Return and Reintegration Facility's Reaching Undocumented Migrants (RUM) project, it aims to stimulate further discussion of existing practices, their impacts, and options to scale up promising efforts. This analysis is based on a thorough literature review; interviews with government and nongovernmental stakeholders in eight European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom); and discussion among public officials, local administrations, civil-society actors, and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) at roundtables in July and October 2024 organised by the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) as part of the RUM project.

2 Growing Attention to and EU Investment in Addressing Irregular Migration

Irregular migrants make up a small fraction of all migrants in the European Union, despite often being at the centre of public and policy scrutiny. Accurate data on their numbers are limited, though recent research indicates that the overall population of irregular migrants in the European Union has remained relatively stable in size over the last decade.² However, a more complex story lies beneath such topline estimates. Available figures suggest that irregular entries into EU countries fluctuate over time,³ but the fluctuations captured in such data

may reflect changes in enforcement practices, migration routes, and patterns of movement for certain groups of migrants, rather than clear increases or decreases in flows. For example, Frontex recorded 380,227 detected irregular border crossings in 2023 (about 17 per cent higher than encounters in 2022 and the highest figure since 2016),⁴ but detected irregular border crossings decreased by 42 per cent in the first nine months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023.⁵ At the same time, available data on return rates suggest a minority of irregular migrants ordered to leave the European Union do so.⁶ According to Eurostat, for example, the European Union issued 484,160 leave orders to non-EU citizens in 2023, and less than one-quarter of these individuals left the European Union.⁷ Finally, because there are multiple ways to become irregular (e.g., irregular entry, visa overstay) and to resolve irregularity (e.g., voluntary or forced return, obtaining a regular status), and these processes occur simultaneously, the characteristics of the irregular migrant population may change over time even if the topline numbers remain stable.

Concerns about irregular migration into the bloc as well as persistent gaps between return orders issued and actual returns have placed increased pressure on EU policymakers to improve the effectiveness of return policies. This has led to a range of return-focused initiatives, including the introduction of assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes in most EU Member States, the adoption of new EU policies or strategies, and the earmarking of (larger) budgets, all paving the way for more EU-wide cooperation. The European Commission's first Action Plan on Return in 2015, its updated plan in 2017, and the expansion of Frontex's mandate on returns in 2019 have all aimed to enhance return operations.⁸ Notable EU-level efforts also include the 2020 Pact on Migration and Asylum's reiteration of the need for effective return policies,⁹ the creation of the Joint Reintegration Service in 2022 (now the European Union Reintegration Programme),¹⁰ and

the Commission's intensified efforts since 2021 to promote voluntary returns (over forced returns), launching the first EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration.¹¹ Earlier initiatives, such as the Reach Out 1 and 2 projects implemented by the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) and the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) through the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), sought to develop effective approaches to engage irregular migrants and identify trusted stakeholders who could support them.¹² More recently, the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) has supported EU Member States and partner countries as they strengthen their return and reintegration systems and foster collaboration among stakeholders.¹³ At the national level, pressure to increase returns has also driven legislative reforms, new government structures, updated operational strategies, and new reintegration programmes.¹⁴ These measures have, however, had mixed results and return rates remain relatively low.

One aspect of return programmes that has gained increased attention in recent years is how to effectively reach irregular migrants and inform them about available support for return and reintegration.

One aspect of return programmes that has gained increased attention in recent years is how to effectively reach irregular migrants and inform them about available support for return and reintegration. Although a few outreach and counselling initiatives have been in place for some years, especially those targeting migrants with a return decision with information about AVRR programmes, attention to such programmes has increased—albeit unevenly and in some places more than others—in recent years. This reflects, in part, a growing understanding of the

importance and challenges of reaching migrants who are not in contact with authorities and who are unaware of available pathways out of irregularity.¹⁵ This can be seen in how the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration encourages Member States to reach out to irregular migrants as early as possible to inform them about return options,¹⁶ the EU Framework on Return Counselling's guidance to Member States on such efforts,¹⁷ and various national and local governments' exploration of different methods for reaching this group in a more constructive and supportive way.

In some cases, outreach and counselling efforts have shifted beyond a sole focus on return, emphasising case resolution more broadly and exploring alternative pathways out of irregularity. This growing diversity of initiatives, as well as of the actors and programme models involved, are discussed in the next two sections.

3 Outreach and Counselling: A diverse field, in more ways than one

The terms 'outreach' and 'counselling' refer to activities aiming to reach and inform a target audience—in this case, irregular migrants—about information relevant to their lives. In the context of irregular migration, this includes sharing information about migrants' rights (including access to certain services), legal obligations, and possible pathways out of irregularity (including options to regularise their stay or to return to their origin countries).¹⁸ To do this, outreach counsellors typically seek to identify and establish contact with migrants who lack legal status in the country and work to building a relationship of trust that will enable them to share information to help the migrants make informed decisions about

their future, filling in knowledge gaps and countering misinformation they may have received from smugglers, peers, or other sources.

In recent years, numerous initiatives have been put in place at the EU, national, and local levels aimed at enhancing outreach and counselling for irregular migrants. Yet there has been no cohesive strategy guiding these efforts. Instead, what has developed is a patchwork of approaches, each designed to address different subgroups within this broad and heterogeneous population. This patchwork also stems from the diversity of stakeholders involved, each operating with distinct interests and methods and within different contexts.¹⁹ Finally, this lack of a unified approach reflects the absence of consensus and robust evidence on promising strategies, which have meant many actors learn what works through trial and error.

This section takes stock of the wide range of approaches to outreach and counselling for irregular migrants. It focuses on four key dimensions in which these initiatives differ: the stakeholders driving these efforts, their target groups, and the setup and scope of the outreach and counselling offered.

A. *Leading actors*

A wide range of actors engage in outreach and counselling initiatives targeting irregular migrants. This includes national and local governmental actors, NGOs, civil-society groups, and sometimes, international organisations and local service providers. National and local authorities sometimes take a direct role in offering counselling services, often linked to their roles in migration management (including returns), the preservation of public order, and health-care systems. For example, the Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service is responsible for state-run counselling in the Netherlands and has developed a standard methodology, in which its counsellors use one-on-one or small-group sessions

to encourage migrants whose asylum claims have been rejected to voluntarily leave the country with government support.²⁰ In many other instances, NGOs, local civil-society groups, or the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) step in to offer information and guidance, motivated by humanitarian concerns, and/or to help bridge the trust gap between migrants and government-affiliated counsellors.²¹ Additional efforts come from legal advisors, psychologists, and emergency shelter staff, who may refer irregular migrants to specific services or provide specific support.

In many cases, these different stakeholders work in parallel and siloed. However, some multistakeholder partnerships have been introduced to improve coordination and referral processes. For example, in Finland, cities have formed specialised teams to assist irregular migrants by fostering collaboration among city officials, civil society, and NGOs.²² Similarly, Fedasil has established coordination structures in Belgium to facilitate cooperation among national and local authorities, along with civil-society groups.²³ In Milan, a multistakeholder network has expanded the outreach of the NGO Associazione Franco Verga, enabling referrals from hospitals, municipalities, and prisons for irregular migrants seeking return or counselling services.²⁴

While this diversity of stakeholders reflects the growing interest in and varied reasons for conducting outreach or counselling, it also inevitably leads to a patchwork of approaches. The actors involved operate at different levels, with different capacities and goals, and often seek to reach distinct subgroups within the irregular migrant population (as discussed in the next subsection). The resulting dynamic landscape can be both a strength and a limitation. On one hand, stakeholders' different competencies and networks increase the likelihood of reaching different subgroups. On the other hand, the lack of coordination can result in fragmented or duplicated efforts, gaps in service delivery, and hinder the ex-

change of information about the target population that could lead to more impactful initiatives.

B. *Target groups*

Another way in which outreach and counselling efforts differ relates to the groups they aim to serve. While all part of the broader irregular migrant population, differences in individuals' reasons for being irregular, mobility profiles, sociodemographic characteristics and risk factors, and origins can produce distinct challenges and call for different types of outreach or counselling.

- ▶ **Forms of irregularity:** The situation that has led someone into irregularity (e.g., a negative decision on an asylum claim or visa overstay) will in some cases influence whether the person will encounter and be eligible to access a particular outreach service. For example, in Denmark, the government has focused on reaching rejected asylum seekers, with the goal of increasing returns, while the Swiss municipality of Zurich primarily targets individuals who are not in touch with government systems (a group that does not include rejected asylum seekers) to ensure they can access essential services.²⁵
- ▶ **Mobility profile:** Some outreach efforts target both migrants staying in a country (whether because they have settled there or because they are stranded) and those in transit (for instance, those travelling from countries such as Belgium or France to the United Kingdom). Others focus on one of the two—an approach that can (and should) shape not only the information shared with migrants but also the format of outreach efforts. For instance, reaching transit migrants often requires mobile outreach teams rather than stationary services.

- ▶ **Sociodemographic characteristics and risk factors:** Irregular migrants are diverse in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics and vulnerabilities, including subpopulations such as children and youth (some of whom are unaccompanied minors), rough sleepers, and individuals facing mental health issues or substance use disorders. These characteristics shape why and how outreach efforts reach these groups, including to assist them in accessing legal assistance and essential services.
- ▶ **Nationality and geopolitical considerations:** Some outreach initiatives strategically target specific nationalities, driven by particular goals, the size of the nationality group, and/or geopolitical considerations. For example, return-focused programmes may concentrate on nationals of countries where there is no perceived risk associated with repatriation or where the destination and origin countries have a strong working relationship that would facilitate a smoother voluntary return process.

This heterogeneity has prompted the creation of outreach strategies tailored to different groups' characteristics and needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Such tailored approaches can help initiatives meet their specific aims, but this population heterogeneity—coupled with the lack of coordination in the field—can also mean some irregular migrants are left without sufficient support while others are targeted multiple times.

C. *The setup of initiatives*

Counselling and outreach can be conducted in different ways to accommodate different migrant profiles and the goals and capacity of the stakeholders involved. For instance, many irregular migrants shy away from contact with government offices, fearing

detention or deportation, and prefer to interact and access assistance in more informal settings. Others may be apprehensive of being seen by smugglers or peers within their community who are sceptical of engaging in any type of counselling, and particularly return-related services. And still others, especially rough sleepers or people with mental health issues or substance use disorders, may first need help with addressing their immediate survival concerns before engaging in conversations about their future. As a result, the setup of outreach and information-sharing initiatives varies, including in terms of location, mode of communication, and the institutional frameworks within which they take place.

- ▶ **Location:** Counselling may be available in indoor settings in certain locations, including in reception centres, humanitarian assistance hubs, and fixed information hubs for the broader migrant population. Examples include Barcelona's SAIER (Service Centre for Immigrants, Emigrants, and Refugees) and Germany's Welcome Centres, which provide centralised legal, social, and return counselling services.²⁶ Similarly, return help desks exist in some Belgian cities. These initiatives, however, rely on migrants taking the initiative to visit, which can be a significant barrier for many. To overcome this barrier and actively reach specific groups of migrants, some initiatives use outdoor strategies to connect with people where they are. This includes the mobile teams in France and Belgium that engage migrants, including those who are on the move or sleeping rough, in public spaces such as parks, train stations, and informal camps.²⁷ In some cases, organisations use a mix of approaches.²⁸ This can help to lower the accessibility threshold, with outdoor outreach establishing initial contact and building trust, followed by more structured support in indoor settings.²⁹

- ▶ **Communication format:** Information provision can take many forms, including written materials such as brochures, posters, leaflets, and websites.³⁰ Social media platforms and apps have also become important tools for disseminating information, with platforms such as TikTok emerging as key resources for reaching specific (often younger) sociodemographic groups.³¹ Video calls (for instance, with previous returnees or origin-country stakeholders) and in-person meetings with government authorities or civil-society groups have also been used to build trust and share information with irregular migrants.³² Finally, phone-based information hotlines are available in some places, for instance Belgium’s return desks.³³
- ▶ **Institutional framework:** The institutional structures within which outreach and counselling take place often reflect the stakeholders and goals involved. Governments may collaborate with trusted civil-society stakeholders and individuals with relevant lived experience (such as former outreach recipients, diaspora members, or intercultural mediators) when seeking to reach individuals who may otherwise be hesitant to engage with the authorities. For example, under the Reach Out project, the French and Belgian national governments worked with mobile teams—often multilingual civil-society workers—who acted as first points of contact to reach the target group.³⁴ Under the Conex project in Belgium, Fedasil also works with local partners—mainly cities but also civil society—and international organisations such as IOM to facilitate information-sharing and referral mechanisms for irregular migrants.³⁵ In Ireland, authorities work in partnership with diaspora groups and community leaders to leverage their trusted roles within migrant

communities to enhance information dissemination and support.³⁶ And in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, Project Barka engages with irregular migrants who formerly struggled with substance use to conduct outreach to others in a similar position, using their experiences to help connect migrants with assistance.³⁷

Each of these setups has strengths and weaknesses. For example, anecdotal evidence highlights the effectiveness of in-person meetings over written materials and emphasises the importance of investing in trust-building and of implementing firewall mechanisms to prevent service providers and other actors engaged in outreach from having to report the irregular status of service beneficiaries to immigration authorities.³⁸ Additional research is needed, however, to shed light on how these dynamics may vary in different settings or with different groups.³⁹

D. The scope of initiatives

In addition to their setup, outreach and counselling efforts also differ in the scope of their operations and their approaches to connecting irregular migrants with appropriate services. In some cases, outreach or counselling is offered as a standalone service, while in others, it forms part of a broader support package. The first model often focuses primarily or exclusively on establishing contact with irregular migrants and referring them to other entities for specialised services such as health care, legal assistance, or return counselling. In these cases, counsellors adopt the role of facilitator, serving as a bridge to services without directly offering extensive support themselves.

Programmes that go beyond offering essential information and referrals and provide certain forms of assistance directly vary in the types of support they offer. This may include social-legal support, access to shelter and meals, mental health services, and guidance with the complex process of navigating out of

irregularity, such as through asylum applications, regularisation, or voluntary return. For example, efforts targeting more vulnerable groups such as rough sleepers and irregular migrants with mental health issues have sometimes adopted a broader approach by integrating counselling and essential services such as accommodation and health care to help individuals attain stability. For instance, the ‘bed, bath, bread’ model in the Netherlands and the similar ‘shelter and orientation’ model in Belgium provide irregular migrants with temporary housing and basic services, and counselling is embedded within these facilities—addressing immediate needs first before engaging in discussions about the future. Similarly, the pilot National Immigration Facilities (Landelijke Vreemdelingen Voorzieningen) introduced in the Netherlands in 2023 offer temporary housing and counselling for long-term solutions.⁴⁰ And the Finalisation du Trajet Migratoire (Finalisation of the Migration Journey) initiative launched in Brussels in 2023 involves the publicly mandated nonprofit Bruss’Help partnering with several Public Centres for Social Action and Welfare to provide outreach and counselling alongside urgent medical care. Eligible irregular migrants receive cards that enable them to access free medical services, along with social assistance and legal advice, including assessment of their migration status and options for regularisation or voluntary return.⁴¹ In other instances, outreach and counselling efforts can even encompass social integration support in the host country, such as assistance with finding employment, or social reintegration support for migrants who return to their country of origin, including through family mediation.⁴²

Efforts targeting more vulnerable groups such as rough sleepers and irregular migrants with mental health issues have sometimes adopted a broader approach.

This diverse landscape reflects the adaptive nature of actors in this field as they work to respond to the varied situations and needs of specific target groups. However, it also raises important questions regarding which services are offered, in what combination, and to whom. Should all irregular migrants receive the same level of support, or should more intensive, long-term interventions be reserved for the most vulnerable populations? To what extent are these decisions shaped by policy and programme goals or by the characteristics of target groups?

4 Understanding the Goals Behind Outreach and Counselling

Understanding the goals and priorities that drive different stakeholders to engage with irregular migrants—whether ensuring access to basic services, facilitating voluntary return, or otherwise helping them find a pathway out of irregularity—is key to making sense of the diversity of practices and approaches in the field. It is also an important first step for any effort to bring greater coordination to this work (e.g., via multistakeholder partnerships) and to address gaps in support.

A. *Ensuring access to basic services and support*

One motivation for developing outreach and counselling programmes is to ensure that irregular migrants know about and have access to basic services, such as health care, shelter, and food assistance. These initiatives aim to reduce immediate vulnerabilities and address critical gaps in service delivery, either by connecting irregular migrants with other stakeholders or services through referrals or by directly providing assistance, especially in situations

where these individuals may otherwise be overlooked.

NGOs (e.g., those active in emergency shelters) and local government entities that regularly encounter this group are among those that conduct outreach and counselling to facilitate service access. Often, this is driven by a commitment to human rights and the belief that all individuals, regardless of their legal status, should have their basic needs met. In other cases, outreach related to service access stems from a mandate to safeguard public order or public health. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination-related outreach programmes for hard-to-reach groups, including irregular migrants, played a vital role in preventing wider outbreaks and safeguarding public health. Similarly, access to harm reduction services, such as supervised drug consumption rooms, have sometimes been made available to irregular migrants dealing with substance use disorders. These services help local governments balance multiple priorities, promoting healthier outcomes for irregular migrants while addressing public safety concerns for the broader community by reducing risks related to a highly contagious virus or public drug use.

Local authorities and civil society have experimented with different approaches to attain this goal. Many initiatives have focused on enhancing referrals to specific services, securing irregular migrants' access to these services, and/or raising awareness about available support. In Belgium, for example, Project Lama operates two mobile teams that work in public spaces such as streets, metro stations, and informal camps in Brussels to connect irregular migrants who use drugs with social and health services.⁴³ In Spain, the city of Barcelona has played an active role in encouraging irregular migrants to register in the local population register (the *padrón municipal*), including by facilitating the registration of even those without a fixed address, to ensure anyone can access basic services and support.⁴⁴

Similarly, the city of Ghent has sought to spread the word among irregular migrants that they can get a medical card that grants free access to essential health-care services.⁴⁵

B. Increasing voluntary return rates

Another driver behind many counselling and outreach programmes is the aim of increasing voluntary return rates among hard-to-reach irregular migrants, in line with the EU Return Directive, the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, and national policy priorities.⁴⁶ Recognising the role of effective outreach and counselling in tackling irregularity, many national governments (and in some cases, other actors) have sought to inform irregular migrants of their options for voluntary return and reintegration support, notably through AVRR programmes, including what financial assistance may be available.

Such initiatives frequently come from a legal perspective, primarily driven by national governments' view of counselling as a mechanism for maintaining control over who remains within their territory and improving compliance with both national and EU return policies. For example, the Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service has focused on designing counselling sessions that encourage people whose asylum claims have been rejected to return voluntarily to their origin countries with government assistance.⁴⁷ Similarly, Denmark has invested in tailored, early-stage return counselling, providing rejected asylum seekers with information about available support and encouraging them to participate in the return process.⁴⁸

Across EU Member States, the translation of this goal into practice has occurred in different ways. In some, public authorities (e.g., police) have taken on the leading role, whereas in others, the government has worked with NGOs or other actors. The emerging

evidence in this field suggests that trust is critical for the messages communicated to land and for them to lead to behavioural changes.⁴⁹ It is in part for this reason that countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands have engaged NGOs (e.g., Caritas) or previous returnees (as done, for instance, by IOM in the Netherlands) in return counselling efforts.⁵⁰

C. *Advancing case resolution by considering multiple ways to address irregularity*

Recognising that limiting counselling efforts to only promoting return (or any other single solution) can hinder trust and engagement, some initiatives have taken a broader perspective by helping migrants consider multiple paths out of irregularity.⁵¹ This broader approach to case resolution may include helping those with protection needs apply for asylum or navigate ongoing asylum procedures, exploring other options for regularising their status, voluntarily returning to their origin country, or relocating to another country through available legal immigration channels.

Local governments and NGOs have played a major role in developing this multifaceted focus on case resolution, often motivated by a commitment to meeting irregular migrants where they are and providing practical solutions that help them exit irregularity and actively contribute to their communities. This locally driven approach often prioritises individualised case management and tangible impacts, rather than focusing solely on securing legal status or increasing return numbers. Such approaches have emerged, for instance, in multiple cities in the Netherlands and Spain.⁵² At the national level, a similar shift has also taken place. Some national governments have embraced case resolution strategies based on growing evidence that approaches centred on comprehensive counselling rather than return

alone are more effective in reaching and engaging irregular migrants. In Belgium, for example, counselling efforts have focused on getting people off the street and resolving as many cases as possible.⁵³






This locally driven approach often prioritises individualised case management and tangible impacts.

In practice, this broader focus means that various kinds of information are shared during counselling sessions, including not only information on voluntary return options and the risks associated with irregular stay but also information about pathways to legal residency for which migrants may qualify.⁵⁴ In Antwerp, for example, the General Welfare Centre operates a Migration Advisory Centre that has at some points offered social and legal assistance to anyone with questions about residence options and procedures in Belgium, including the asylum procedure, humanitarian regularisation, refugee recognition, and more.⁵⁵ Their approach emphasised accessible reception, individualised follow-up, and tailored counselling. Similarly, the Goedwerk Foundation in the Netherlands concentrates on providing future-oriented support to help individuals identify realistic and sustainable solutions that are adapted to their specific circumstances.⁵⁶

The diverse motivations driving outreach and counselling initiatives—whether rooted in concerns about public order, migrants' well-being, or specific migration policy objectives—shed light on both the complex realities of irregular migration and what moves government and nongovernmental stakeholders to action, as illustrated in Figure 1. What has been less well documented is the extent to which the approaches these stakeholders adopt effectively serve these purposes and have the desired impact.

FIGURE 1

What motivates different actors to conduct outreach and counselling for irregular migrants?

	 National authorities	 Local authorities	 Nongov. & civil-society organisations	 International organisations	 Local service providers
Public health & order	Safeguarding public health and order, as per policy mandate	Ensuring health and safety in local communities	Reducing harm and addressing immediate health concerns	Advocating for global health standards	Providing direct health-related services
Social inclusion & holistic support	Limited engagement	Supporting local integration and social cohesion, addressing immediate or complex needs	Advancing migrants' rights and social inclusion, via direct support or referrals	Supporting integration and comprehensive assistance within broader mandates	Coordinating and delivering essential services and integration programmes (e.g., language or job training)
Voluntary returns	Enforcing national migration policies and adhering to EU return policies	Supporting national return efforts, mainly through local outreach	Helping migrants make informed, voluntary decisions about return	Helping migrants make informed return decisions and supporting their reintegration in origin countries	Rarely involved directly in return processes
Broader case resolution	Ensuring legal compliance, mainly with return policies	Supporting local residents' pathway out of irregularity	Helping migrants navigate return or regularisation options, incl. by building trust	Supporting global legal and migration frameworks	Effectively delivering services (e.g., legal, health) to a population that may include irregular migrants

Level of engagement: ● Strong ● Moderate ● Limited

Source: author illustration.

5 Knowledge Gaps in a Growing Field

Despite growing interest in outreach and counselling for irregular migrants, investments in these activities remain fragmented across the European Union. A relatively small number of local authorities and national governments are driving this trend, and efforts are unevenly distributed and often lack coordination. This patchwork of approaches has resulted in significant knowledge gaps, with limited data collection and a weak evidence base, making it

difficult to determine what works best and in which contexts.

There is some anecdotal or project-specific evidence that points to the positive impact of outreach and counselling efforts. For example, early findings from a survey conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre with irregular migrants in Brussels and Paris suggest that those in Brussels—where significant investments have been made to reach out and raise awareness about AVRR options—are better informed about the possibility of receiving AVRR support and what that entails, compared to those in Paris.⁵⁷ And in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands, outreach

and counselling initiatives with a broader focus on case resolution that operate under the framework of the National Immigration Facilities have yielded impressive results, supporting the resolution of cases for about 75 per cent of participants (whether through reapplying for asylum, regularising their status through other means, or agreeing to return to their origin country).⁵⁸

Still, the wider, cross-programmatic gaps in knowledge in this field limit the capacity of policymakers and practitioners to deliver targeted, effective interventions and to do so in a resource-efficient manner. Critical questions include: Who is missing in outreach efforts? What do success and progress look like across different goals? And how can the most effective approaches be identified and scaled up? This section explores these major evidence gaps, some efforts underway to help address them, and areas where more work is needed.

A. Understanding migrant profiles and needs: The key to tailored support

One of the most glaring gaps in the field is the lack of knowledge about the target population.⁵⁹ Estimates of the number of irregular migrants in most EU Member States are incomplete, inaccurate, and fragmented.⁶⁰ Data are similarly scarce on these migrants' sociodemographic characteristics and needs (such as the prevalence of medical conditions, mental health disorders, and substance use).⁶¹ There is also little information on how these and other factors influence migrants' mobility decisions, the sources they most trust for information, engagement with counselling initiatives, and familiarity with voluntary return and reintegration support.⁶²

These data gaps are especially problematic given the diversity within this population, which includes

individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and reasons for lacking a regular migration status. Without a more detailed understanding of this diversity, it is difficult to know who is and is not being reached by outreach and counselling efforts, and how to design interventions to effectively address each group's unique needs. For instance, outreach strategies that work for single adults may not be suitable for families with children or for individuals with serious health issues. Accurate data on the prevalence of mental health issues could, for example, signal the need to include mental health professionals in outreach teams, significantly enhancing their impact. Similarly, understanding migration trajectories and how they may lead to experiences of violence, exploitation, or substance use is key to tailoring communication and building trust with affected groups.⁶³ Targeted approaches facilitated by better population data hold the potential to not only improve outcomes for migrants and resolve more cases but also to make resource allocation more efficient and effective.

Multiple interconnected factors contribute to the limited availability and poor quality of data on irregular migrants. Among these are the national and local contexts in which data collection occurs.⁶⁴ Many EU Member States exclude irregular migrants from official data-gathering processes such as censuses, while some service providers adopt a universal approach in which they do not ask about or record individuals' immigration status in order to promote broad service access. Both approaches limit the gathering of data on the size and specific characteristics of this population, as does many irregular migrants' hesitancy to engage with authorities and institutional structures due to fears that doing so could lead to detention and deportation.⁶⁵ Another challenge is the lack of consensus on what constitutes migrant irregularity, leading to inconsistent definitions and measurements across contexts and

stakeholders and to associated data comparability issues at the local, national, and EU levels.⁶⁶

Some EU and national actors do collect certain data on irregular migration and irregular migrants. For instance, Frontex and Eurostat collect data on irregular border crossings and the number of people found to be illegally present in the European Union. Additionally, Member States maintain records on people whose asylum claims have been rejected and those who have been issued leave orders. However, because these datasets are compiled as part of specific operational processes (e.g., border management), they only cover a portion of the irregular migrant population (e.g., those who receive leave orders). In addition, they often do not include certain details and are not broken down in ways that would support the design of effective, targeted outreach and counselling efforts.⁶⁷

While these local initiatives have generated useful data, they often rely on irregular migrants voluntarily engaging with official systems.

Some cities have taken steps to address this knowledge gap through localised data collection. In Brussels and Milan, for example, authorities have conducted counts of specific groups, such as irregular migrants staying in emergency shelters or sleeping rough.⁶⁸ Although helpful for gaining insights into these vulnerable groups, such efforts nonetheless only capture a segment of the irregular migrant population. Zurich has gone a step further by passing a referendum to introduce the Züri City Card, which grants all residents, regardless of their immigration status, access to municipal services—an initiative that will allow the city to collect basic data on irregular migrants who register for a card.⁶⁹ Similarly, Ghent provides irregular migrants with cards that allow them to receive health-care services without being billed directly, facilitating the collection of some

information on this population.⁷⁰ While these local initiatives have generated useful data, they often rely on irregular migrants voluntarily engaging with official systems, which some likely remain wary of doing due to fears of detection. As a result, the data these efforts collect, though helpful, still present only a partial view of their city's irregular migrant population and may over- or underrepresent certain groups. For example, a study in the city of Vienna found that irregular migrant women are more likely to access health services while men are more likely to access legal advice about labour relations and accommodation services—findings that suggest data collection via such services may not be representative of the gender breakdown of the overall irregular migrant population.⁷¹

Another significant problem is that, because these data-gathering efforts are rarely coordinated, they produce a fragmented picture of irregular migrants across different regions. In addition, much of the information they produce is scattered across different administrative databases and registries,⁷² and data sharing between actors is minimal, often due to privacy concerns. For instance, NGOs and civil-society groups may be reluctant to share information on the irregular migrants with whom they work, fearing that it could be used for enforcement purposes rather than for functions they prioritise (e.g., providing assistance and support). This limited data-sharing exacerbates the already siloed nature of data collection⁷³ and further hinders the development of a more comprehensive understanding of irregular migrant populations and interventions to connect with them.⁷⁴

B. Identifying effective programme models: What works, when, and why

Another critical gap relates to understanding how different outreach and counselling approaches func-

tion in practice. While various methods have been employed, there is scant documentation of the exact practices implemented, including who is responsible for these initiatives, how services are delivered and operate, and the rationale (goals) behind the decision to adopt a particular method or practice.

This leaves important questions unanswered, including how different types of engagement or counsellor profiles influence the outcome of outreach and counselling sessions. This lack of evidence means practitioners often find themselves operating by trial and error, with learning slow and reactive rather than proactive. This can contribute to frustration and burnout among those leading outreach and create gaps in service delivery, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of these efforts. It can also result in the inefficient use of resources.⁷⁵

Better evidence on the various outreach and counselling models that exist would help inform decisions regarding which approaches and practices to adopt in specific contexts. It would also empower programme implementers to make strategic investments and inform discussions about scaling up promising models across cities and countries.⁷⁶ For example, if evidence indicates that counsellors with relevant lived experiences excel at building trust with certain subgroups of irregular migrants, this information could guide outreach strategies. Additionally, understanding the impact of different counselling settings (such as mobile teams versus fixed locations) could result in more tailored services that connect with irregular migrants in the manner most effective for different subgroups (such as transit migrants and long-term residents). Furthermore, understanding the effectiveness of different information tools in reaching different target groups could inform engagement strategies; for example, digital platforms may be helpful in reaching young and tech-savvy migrants, while other approaches may be needed for those with limited digital literacy.

C. *Defining success: Aligning goals and impact metrics*

Measuring impact and identifying promising practices in outreach and counselling are crucial for assessing whether interventions are achieving their intended purpose, for guiding necessary adjustments and investments, and for fostering peer learning in the field. However, few initiatives have undergone robust evaluation.⁷⁷ This often stems from inadequate time and resources being set aside for the systematic analysis of programme operations or from a lack of understanding of what should be measured and how. The latter issue is rooted in a deeper challenge: how to define success in a field where different actors have different, sometimes conflicting goals. At times, assessments reduce the concept of ‘success’ to a single metric, such as the number of returnees, which fails to capture an initiative’s broader impacts and whether these align with the initiative’s core goals.

A clear understanding of objectives and success criteria is essential for determining what data should be collected and what metrics should be used to assess progress and impact. For example, in the Netherlands, the pilot National Immigration Facilities have reported high case resolution rates for irregular migrants, with 60 per cent of cases resolved on average by July 2022 and even higher rates in some cities (e.g., 75 per cent in Utrecht). However, whether this constitutes ‘success’ depends on one’s perspective. Stakeholders concerned primarily with returns may consider the initiative less successful since only about 10 per cent of those counselled decided to return to their country of origin.⁷⁸ The definition of counselling effectiveness in terms of return numbers is relatively common among national authorities, but other stakeholders, especially NGOs, frequently adopted a broader definition of success—even when still focused on supporting voluntary return—considering factors such as increased migrant

willingness to engage in a conversation with counsellors or cooperate with authorities, knowledge of available AVRR support, or successful engagement throughout the return process.⁷⁹ And in some cases, success may be defined as people finding a way out of irregularity more broadly (whether through return, a successful asylum claim, or regularisation) or accessing basic services for which they qualify.

This absence of a clear and consistent definition of success is somewhat inevitable, given the various actors involved in outreach and counselling and their different motivations. However, it contributes to the tendency to simplify ‘success’ to a single metric and to the fragmented nature of the evidence base in the field. Going forward, it will be important for individual projects and stakeholders to reflect on how to best align their goals, impact metrics, and assessment practices, and to consider using multiple criteria to measure project impacts.

6 Recommendations and Conclusion

As European policymakers at the local, national, and EU levels grapple with mounting pressure to tackle the issue of irregular migration, outreach and counselling initiatives for irregular migrants are increasingly important tools. These initiatives can play a crucial role in connecting with segments of this population that may otherwise be unaware of available pathways out of irregularity—including, but not limited to, assisted voluntary return options—or who may struggle to engage in future planning without support meeting basic needs such as for medical care.

Interest and investments in this field have grown over the past decade, albeit unevenly, with most experimentation driven by cities, NGOs, and a few national governments. This fragmented landscape—with different initiatives driven by different objec-

tives and targeting different groups—has hindered opportunities for peer learning and collaboration. Compounding this issue is the weak evidence base, highlighted by a lack of comprehensive, EU-wide mapping of who is doing what, where, and how in the counselling and outreach space, alongside insufficient data on the impact of such projects to date.

Policymakers and programme designers need reliable information to make smart decisions about the models they adopt and how they allocate (often limited) resources.

To move the field forward, it will be crucial to strengthen this evidence base. Policymakers and programme designers need reliable information to make smart decisions about the models they adopt and how they allocate (often limited) resources, and to potentially convince more national authorities and other stakeholders to engage in these efforts.⁸⁰ To achieve this, robust knowledge-building efforts should focus on three key pillars:

- ▶ **Enhancing understanding of the irregular migrant population.** Given the heterogeneity of this group, counselling and outreach programmes’ monitoring and evaluation efforts should seek to capture detailed data on participants—including their sociodemographic characteristics; migration trajectory and what led them to irregularity; and medical, mental health, or substance use challenges—in order to tailor practices effectively and to identify gaps in outreach. Furthermore, coordinated data collection and sharing efforts, backed by strong privacy protections, could enhance data accuracy by pooling information from different entities active in the field. Additionally, broader policy efforts, such as issuing identity or

health-care cards to all residents of a locality or conducting inclusive population counts, could present opportunities to gather information about the irregular migrant population in an area, with appropriate firewall mechanisms in place to encourage participation without fear it will lead to detention or deportation.

► **Documenting the impact and progress of existing outreach and counselling efforts.** Monitoring outcomes is crucial to documenting a programme's operations, assessing its effectiveness, and to helping policymakers and implementers finetune their approach. Key starting points are clarifying goals and expected impacts, ensuring that success metrics go beyond a single indicator, and putting in place a process for tracking progress towards these goals over time.⁸¹ Additionally, gathering information on the costs associated with different initiatives could help decisionmakers evaluate the cost-effectiveness of their methods, while information on the factors behind certain practices' success could inform discussions about their scalability and transferability.

► **Mapping the diversity of outreach and counselling mechanisms.** Beyond assessing individual programmes' impacts, it will also be important to build understanding of operations across the field of outreach and counselling for irregular migrants by documenting key aspects of service delivery. This issue brief has outlined some of the major axes along which initiatives differ (their lead actors, modes of operation, and goals, for example), but a more comprehensive mapping and ongoing, systematic monitoring of approaches are needed to determine what works best, for whom, under

what conditions, and with which goals in mind. Additional factors also merit attention, including how referrals to other services function.⁸² By considering these programme elements alongside participant profiles and outcomes indicators, it will become easier to identify which methods—such as one-on-one sessions, helpdesks, or social media—are most effective for reaching different groups of irregular migrants. Data on poor programme outcomes or procedural gaps can offer equally useful insights, such as why some individuals may disengage from counselling (e.g., due to delays in legal counsel or lack of family mediation procedures).

Such knowledge-building efforts are essential in this growing field, but they also require resources. To ensure programme leaders and staff are not overwhelmed, it will be important to explore ways to streamline and ease the burden of data collection. This could include digital tools or standardised frameworks, such as the monitoring and evaluation framework being developed as part of the Reaching Undocumented Migrants (RUM) project. Sufficient funding is also necessary not only for data collection but to support feedback mechanisms and coordination structures designed to ensure monitoring and evaluation findings inform programme design and implementation. For instance, regular meetings to review data and ongoing analysis could help identify gaps and prompt necessary adjustments. Peer-learning opportunities for NGOs, governments, and other stakeholders, such as those available through the City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe (C-MISE) and the RUM community of practice, can help further enhance the evidence base and collaboration in the field. Together, these investments hold the potential to help outreach and counselling efforts more fully meet their objectives at a time when addressing migrant irregularity is a high priority across Europe.

Endnotes

- 1 According to Frontex, more than 1 million people entered Europe irregularly by sea in 2015, a sharp rise from approximately 200,000 in 2014. These movements, mainly driven by conflict in Syria, constituted mixed migration in that the people entering Europe irregularly included both individuals in need of international protection, who are legally permitted to do so under international and European law, and irregular migrants seeking to enter the bloc for other reasons. See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Asylum and Migration into the EU in 2015* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016).
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- 16 European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission . . . The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration'.
- 17 In the area of return counselling, Frontex can support Member States through dedicated return and reintegration counsellors who are part of the Return Specialist Standing Corps. Since the beginning of 2023, Frontex has also been providing training on return and reintegration counselling to national authorities upon request. See Frontex, 'Return Counselling' (news release, 3 February 2022).
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- 70 Author interview with official from the city of Ghent, 18 June 2024.
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