

C-MISE BRIEFING: CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN EU RESEARCH ON IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND CITY-LEVEL POLICYMAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION



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Background

Since 2017, the **City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe** (C-MISE) project has worked with over 70 European cities on practical approaches to responding to the presence of migrants with an irregular status. The EU Commission through its Horizon Europe funding stream has meanwhile financed seven research projects focused on irregular migration, providing significant opportunities for new learning and insight on this topic.

This briefing draws on a one-day hybrid workshop held in Brussels in April 2025 by C-MISE and the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), drawing together academic researchers and city-level policymakers. The workshop aimed to bridge the gap between Horizon Europe funded research on irregular migration and actionable policies at the city level. This included facilitating collaboration between researchers, policymakers and stakeholders in local authorities, as well as equipping local authorities with evidence-based tools, strategies and scalable models of good practice to address the challenges of irregular migration at the city level. In fact, cities and local authorities often need to address some of these challenges to fulfil their own statutory responsibilities such as addressing homelessness, public health and child protection. We also sought to define key priorities for a city-driven research agenda, aligned with EU policy frameworks.

The workshop and this briefing aim to:

- a. highlight new insights arising from research and practice and bring them together; and,
- b. develop a common agenda, driven by research findings and city priorities, aiming to guide future EU and city-level research funding and policymaking.

The seven EU-funded research projects

- [MirreM](#): Measuring Irregular Migration and Related Policies
- [I-CLAIM](#): Improving the Living and Labour Conditions of Irregularised Migrant Households in Europe
- [PRIME](#): Protecting Irregular Migrants in Europe: Institutions, Interests and Policies
- [DignityFirm](#): Dignity for Irregular Migrants in EU Farm 2 Fork Labour Markets
- [GAPS](#): De-centring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond
- [FAiR](#): Finding Agreement in Return
- [MORE](#): Motivations, Experiences and Consequences of Returns and Readmissions Policy: Revealing and Developing Effective Alternatives

The workshop was divided into two parts. The first was devoted to highlighting lessons across and between research projects, with a strong emphasis on their implications for local level policymaking and practice. The second part allowed cities and researchers to find practical ways to integrate research findings into local policy and practice, and to develop an outline of shared policy aims and goals with a view to influencing future research funding calls alongside wider city-level, national and EU policymaking.

Participants at the workshop grappled with three main topics. We use them below to frame our summary analysis of their responses and recommendations.

1. Towards developing a common research agenda

There are key research gaps that were identified across the seven Horizon-funded projects, with implications for urban policy and city governance:

a. Linking irregular migration data to urban planning

- MlrreM findings highlighted the **insufficient and fragmented data** on the characteristics and experiences of diverse migrants with an irregular status, hindering policy tailored to city-level conditions.

Implication: Cities lack reliable metrics for service needs — e.g., education, housing, health — for irregular migrants.

b. Understanding return policies at the local level

- GAPS, MORE and FAiR researchers highlighted the different tensions that arise from the implementation of the EU return policy framework, which is focused on forced returns, without considering migrant experiences or city-level reintegration challenges. Moreover, national government policies are increasingly pushing migrants into irregular status.

Implication: Migrants' access to information and legal counselling is significantly restricted. This also leads to the blurring of the boundaries between voluntary and forced returns. Cities need localised return support strategies.

c. Living and labour conditions of irregular migrants

- DignityFIRM highlighted the precariousness of migrant workers in “farm-to-fork” sectors — but gaps remain in how urban areas host and integrate such labour forces. It also emphasises that the current frameworks create legal and informational vacuums: migrants face overlapping ambiguities (e.g., irregular but working, or having legal residence but no work rights) and lack access to clear guidance on rights.
- I-CLAIM also assesses labour conditions in cities across Europe through intersectional insights (race, gender, class) within urban contexts. It also introduced the notion of “irregularity assemblages”, emphasizing that irregular status emerges from the interaction of immigration/asylum laws, labour/welfare regimes, and public narratives, not just legal exclusion.

Implication: Cities need policies addressing living standards, worker rights and intersectional equity in informal labour markets. Cities can counter this by establishing local guidance and awareness services targeting diverse migrant statuses.

d. Institutional variation and local governance mechanisms

- PRIME shows that national and sectoral institutions heighten vulnerability among irregular migrants, yet the project does not fully explore how cities mediate these effects. It also reveals that the structure of national institutions (e.g., legal systems, welfare regimes, labour regulations) plays a determining role in shaping the lived conditions of irregular migrants across countries.

Implication: Local authorities need frameworks to buffer national-level exclusion, adapting social services and protections.

2. Enhancing collaboration between researchers, policymakers and local authority stakeholders

Coordinated knowledge-sharing platforms

Regular, structured engagement and joint analysis among stakeholders on irregular migration is too often ad hoc, along the lines of: “Oh, by the way, have you seen this report?” If stakeholders in the EU, universities and cities could establish more structured engagement within coordinated knowledge-sharing platforms, the data generated by research could be better harnessed and put to use by policymakers.

Solutions-focused research

Research can be heavily focused on describing and analysing problems. For it to be as useful as possible for cities, it should also explore potential solutions to those problems. This would be more likely to happen if cities could be involved directly in the design and delivery of research, rather than being viewed primarily only as sites for fieldwork. It could also limit the chances of receptive cities being excluded from such initiatives simply because their respective national governments are wary or disinterested. If policymakers at local, regional and national levels are regularly engaged by researchers earlier in a project’s lifespan, then they could help ensure the research addresses genuine challenges of policy formulation and policy implementation and then act as advocates for that research, further down the line, heightening its prospect of impact. Indeed, the EU could involve policymakers in the process even before a call for tenders is put out, to ensure that policy relevance is built into EU-funded research.

Funding for follow-up

To optimise impact, EU-funded projects, which generate both data and analyses – should place more emphasis (and dedicate more funds to) serious efforts at dissemination and knowledge exchange, should place more emphasis on (and dedicate more funds to) serious efforts at dissemination and knowledge exchange. Publishing a paper in a peer-reviewed journal and presenting it at an academic conference is insufficient. One way to enhance the promulgation of research findings would be for C-MISE itself to establish a research-policy group to facilitate that sharing. There may also be a case for investing in capacity-building in European cities in terms of data literacy, so that city policymakers are better placed to interpret and put to good use research data.

Harnessing expertise from experience

The EU and researchers should harness the expertise of cities. It is also in the interests of the EU, cities and universities to employ research methodologies which leverage the unparalleled insight into the situation of irregular migrants of people who themselves are or were in that same situation. Such research also stands to be less extractive in nature. Developing participatory research methods with peer researchers from the group being studied to recruit respondents and run focus groups and surveys can also facilitate more thoroughgoing access than can be achieved via intermediaries.

Beyond the data

In a highly contested policy space, strategic communication is imperative. Research findings may need to be located in a narrative that emphasizes questions of human rights, security and/or economics (e.g., tackling labour shortages). Alongside facilitating data sharing, C-MISE could support the sharing amongst European cities of approaches to effective and resonant story telling around issues concerning undocumented migrants and irregular migration.

I-CLAIM

To uphold their responsibilities for public order and safety, as well as a duty of care for people in their districts, municipalities are often forced to circumvent exclusionary national policies. Several cities across the I-CLAIM countries (e.g., Helsinki, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Naples and Palermo) have extended healthcare and social services to irregularised people beyond the minimum legal requirements established at the national level.

3. Mechanisms for identifying and sharing best practices

At the workshop, we heard of mechanisms for sharing good practice from policymakers (e.g., the [Safe Harbours](#) network) and from researchers (e.g., the [I-CLAIM](#) Podcast).

National networks

C-MISE supports cities to share good practice with other cities across Europe. However, national contexts for policymaking in this field differ markedly. Given that, there is a case for supporting the development of a national network of interested organisations — including cities, university departments and civil society organisations — in each European country, especially where such arrangements are currently underdeveloped or lacking.

Operating principles

Cities throughout Europe operate in different contexts with different competencies, so direct portability will always have its limits. Nonetheless, there are operating principles that can be drawn from research which can be applied in different setting despite their differences. Identifying and articulating these principles, e.g., in relation to approaches to regularisation, may be more useful for others than proposing complete models for replication.

Recommendations:

For EU institutions

- Explore opportunities for local policymakers to be involved in the early stages of developing EU calls for research tenders to ensure that their knowledge of the actual situation on the ground and experience of addressing it is taken into account.
- Encourage more cities in becoming involved in the delivery of research as direct EU grantees, alongside universities.
- Ensure EU funding for research on irregular migration has substantial resources built in for dissemination and knowledge exchange.
- The EU could, through its funding criteria, incentivise researchers to adopt more participatory approaches to their research, maximising its relevance and potential impact.

For national level policy makers

- Support the development of national networks within individual countries to support intra-national sharing of information on irregular migration.

For the City Network on Irregular Migration (C-MISE)

- C-MISE could consider establishing its own research-policy group for mutual engagement and exchange.
- Convene representatives of the EU, member states, cities, civil society organisations and universities to identify key terms in the field of irregular migration and then work together towards agreeing shared definitions of them.

For researchers

- Consider strategic communications as an important dimension of applied research in Europe on irregular migration. Use knowledge-exchange fora like C-MISE to share experience in this domain.
- Researchers, in documenting examples of good practice, could draw out their driving principles, recognising that those principles may be more useful in other settings than the precise detail of the location-specific models themselves.

The **City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe** (C-MISE) is a city-led knowledge-exchange programme supporting European cities in sharing knowledge on city practices and policies responding to the presence of migrants with irregular status in their territory.