A 1.2 million population count in Brussels: how many are there really and who was forgotten?

Key messages

1 For the first time, the complete **unregistered** Brussels' population is calculated in great detail, using demographic models ("**Unregistered**" = not part of the official population counts: it includes documented but unregistered groups, such as tourists, visitors, diplomats and asylum seekers as well as undocumented migrants).

2 The estimation method is objective, transparent, repeatable, transferable to other users and to other populations.

3 Brussels' unregistered population is estimated to be around 125.000 in size, decreasing, ageing, and mostly of non-EU origin.

4 The non-EU **undocumented** Brussels' population is estimated around 52.000, but there are probably also roughly 10.000 undocumented EU citizens.

5 Brussels' policy makers and institutions can now make better informed decisions in the field of health policy (e.g. Covid-vaccines for undocumented immigrants), housing (e.g. vacant housing stock), and all matters related to migration, integration and foreign relations.

Introduction/summary of the problem

Brussels is home to 1.2 million official population, but it also shelters many others. But how many exactly? And who are these people: visitors and tourists, asylum seekers, diplomats, documented and undocumented immigrants? Some of these groups can be identified in registers and statistics, but a large group still goes unnoticed. In the MISAFIR-project, for the first time, the total unregistered population is calculated instead of guessed, with a lot of detail with respect to age and sex, time trends and national origins. Moreover, calculations are transparent and repeatable.

Knowledge is power, and governing requires knowledge. That is the true value of the MISAFIR results. How many Covid-vaccine doses were needed to vaccinate the entire Brussels population? How many of those are fragile elderly unregistered people? What level of vaccination was reached within the unregistered populations? How many places are needed in schools and how many housing units are occupied by these groups? And what is their labour market or economic impact? Finally, let us not forget the general publics' right to neutral objective and verifiable information, especially in a hotly debated subject such as migration.

Methods, approaches and results/body

Belgium has a statistical registry of deaths which counts every death within national borders, and an administrative registry that only counts those in the official population. The difference between the two registries are unlinked deaths. We developed methods for extrapolating the unlinked deaths to reveal the living unregistered population. We did calculations for both Brussels and Belgium, for EU- and non-EU- populations and for other grouped nationalities. It should be stressed that our methods estimate the total unregistered population, not limited to undocumented immigrants[1].

We did, however, also estimate the undocumented population separately. Because we subtracted the numbers of asylum seekers, tourists, visitors and other documented populations from more accurately calculated total estimates, we are convinced that results are more reliable than earlier numbers on the subject.

The most recent data (2012-2016) estimate the total unregistered population at 490.000 in Belgium and 123.000 in the Brussels Region (including asylum seekers, tourists, visitors etc). Unregistered populations are decreasing: they were about 20% l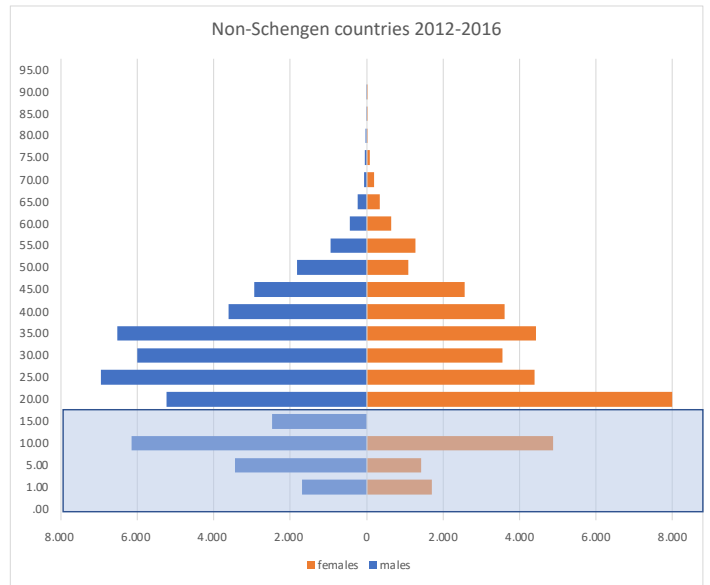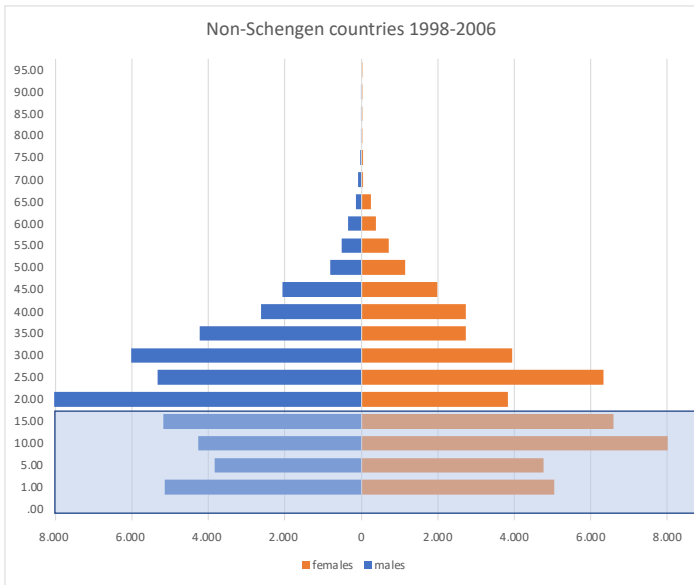arger a decade earlier. Unregistered nationals from so-called 'third countries'[2] are estimated to be around 200.000 (Belgium) and 92.000 (Brussels) people (see the figure below for the case of Brussels Capital Region). There is also a reduction in third country nationals, but that is entirely due to a decrease in the number of unregistered children.

At adult age, numbers are still on the rise. In the distribution of unregistered populations within Brussels Capital Region, Saint-Josse and Saint-Gilles lead the ranking. At the municipality level, there is a very strong association between low median income, share of (official) population of foreign origin, and share of unlinked deaths. Unregistered residents not only reflect social inequality between municipalities, but are a factor in amplifying it.

Finally, the estimated undocumented immigrant population (non-EU) is around 112.000 for Belgium and 50.000 for Brussels, slightly lower than most earlier estimations. Roughly estimated, there are also 10.000 EU-citizens that are undocumented, not having respected registration obligations.

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1   Undocumented migrants are immigrants not in posession of valid and unexpired documents necessary for their stay in Belgium, such as visa, asylum applications during procedure, specific permits, diplomatic status, or foreign passports issued by countries with travel agreements for Belgium or the EU. EU-citizens can travel freely across the Union (Schengen-Treaty), but remain subjected to registration obligations after 3 months of uninterrupted stay. According to the definition just-stated, EU-citizens not respecting their registration obligation become undocumented immigrants, even if it is rather unusual to label them as such.

2   Third countries are countries outside of Europe's free travel zone consisting of the member states + associated countries (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland), and therefore subject to travelling restrictions.
See also: https://dofi.ibz.be/en/themes/third-country-nationals

Methods, approaches and results/body

Non-Schengen countries 1998-2006

Non-Schengen countries 2012-2016

Conclusions

With this new research and technology, tracking unregistered population size and composition is possible using proven tools and models from demography. Compared to earlier efforts to measure such populations, the advantages are significant. First of all, this is probably the first time that the **total** population is estimated instead of separate fractions (undocumented population, tourists, ...), and certainly the first time that such great detail is available.

Secondly, all models and calculations are evidence-based, and can be repeated by third parties. The software and technology will be shared with BISA-Perspective.Brussels to ensure longevity of the research output. Most importantly, many users and public institutions can now set and evaluate targets and benchmarks for their policy, including the unregistered populations onto which they had very little grip before.

Policy recommendations

1. The **first recommendation** is simple and straightforward. It may even seem superfluous, as it applies to all publicly funded research. But there are probably very few research topics that are of interest to such a wide range of domains and potential users as this one. It is to distribute the research results as widely as possible, directed at different sectors and at different levels of potential users and to do so in a variety of formats so that they will effectively reach potential users. As scientists, we are prepared to play our own specific role, but BISA is certainly an ideal partner for sharing results outside of academia.

A few examples: Brussels' politicians defend, reactively or proactively, Brussels' interests at higher levels (federal, international), for instance when legal revisions are discussed regarding the National Register and sub-registers (e.g. Protocol), or on an international level with regard to the EU and its institutions, its diplomatic representations and its citizens living, working or studying in Brussels. In those cases not only the Brussels Region is touched but even more strongly the 19 municipalities with their civil registry offices. Our research results help estimating potential impact of structural change in all matters regarding migration. For internal matters, health-care and prevention are of particular interest, but also housing, public transport, cultural affairs, education, tourism, local formal and informal economy, labour market etcetera. In many of those domains the private sector is also very active: tourism, real estate, and evidently economy and labour market. Finally, the general public has a right to be informed. Those seeking more detailed information should find it through unbiased public channels.

2. The **Second recommendation** is to use the outcomes to establish a dialogue and build bridges with major communities that were identified in the study, without excluding those with a temporary or undocumented status. If the term "population" is interpreted widely, the Brussels' population is more than 10% larger than what is counted by the national register. The study has shed new light on the demographics of those extra 10% of inhabitants: EU-Schengen and non-Schengen populations, the North African, Sub-Saharan African, and Eastern European populations, and estimates of documented and undocumented populations.

We know which populations are growing or shrinking. The share of unlinked deaths helps understanding those evolutions. Building bridges is a matter of mutual interest for the Brussels' authorities and for the communities in question. It helps to deal with emergencies such as outbreaks of infectious disease, public security or natural disaster. But primarily, contacts are useful to have helplines and to exchange information in both directions. The authorities will benefit from a better understanding of the daily needs and aspirations in people that may sooner or later become regular citizens. Unregistered residents will benefit from getting informed on support that is available and on their rights regarding a safe and healthy home and workplace, medical care and protection against exploitation.

Policy recommendations

Obviously, with rights come obligations, such as the obligation for Schengen-citizens to register at the municipalities when staying more than 3 consecutive months in Belgium. A large share of Brussels' 10% shadow population lives in precarious conditions. Having a dialogue and exchanging information is a basic step in improving that situation.

3. The **third recommendation** is to have a thorough round of reflection on what are the long-term goals of Brussels' policy makers regarding different migration related topics. Brussels is one of Europe's most diverse capitals, not only in terms of nationalities but especially in terms of how migration affects the extremes of the social ladder and all layers in-between. Over 75% of Brussels official population has foreign nationality or foreign background (Statbel, 2022). Brussels is also the dominant transfer zone of international migration into the other Belgian regions. How to make the most of migration for Brussels, by making the most of Brussels for its migrant inhabitants, is a crucial optimisation question for the future. Therefore it is important to assess how all components of migration can be supported to contribute to individual and collective welfare: international student exchange, tourism, short-stay and long-stay inflow for all kinds of motives, asylum, …

Once goals are set, the next step could be to screen all regulations and policies for undesired effects that would harm or oppose the match of interests between Brussels and its inhabitants at large.

4. A **fourth** and final **recommendation** is to continue monitoring, collecting new data and studying unregistered populations and migration in Brussels in general. Given the importance of migration in the population, the economy and the face of Brussels in the world, this is self-evident. Two fields of research are crucial. The first is improving data and monitoring instruments. We now have better estimations for the total unregistered population than for some groups that do appear in registers such as asylum seekers. Sheltering asylum seekers is a federal responsibility, while sheltering others is a Brussels' one. Therefore, being able to make a distinction between both is crucial, even if it is only a distinction in numbers. So, how many people are really in the asylum register for Brussels, and how do numbers change over time? How many people are in the protocollary registers (E.U. and others), and how many reside in the capital? How do C-Type and D-type visa affect Brussels? How long do visa-holders actually stay before returning home, or applying for prolongations. Our estimations, especially for undocumented populations, would significantly improve if documented migrants and visitors in Brussels where known more accurately.

Policy recommendations

The second aspect is to follow-up trends that could threaten future welfare for unregistered residents. We detected significant ageing of unregistered populations in Brussels over the last decade. If this would mean that groups of people nearing the end of their productive lives are trapped in precarious conditions, measures for the future must be foreseen.

We also know from research that mortality patterns in unregistered citizens are marked by high degrees of mortality due to avoidable/preventable causes such as heart and circulatory system related morbidity. Cause-specific mortality patterns in unregistered population should be studied so that appropriate and timely measures can be taken and public health is improved.

List of publications

Lafaut, D., Vandenheede, H., Surkyn, J., & Coene, G. (2019).
Counting the non-existing: Causes of death of undocumented migrants in brussels-capital region (Belgium), 2005-2010. Archives of Public Health, 77(1)

Neels, K., Wood, J., Surkyn, J., & Gadeyne, S. (2022).
Spatial variation of migrant-native mortality differentials by duration of residence in Belgium: A story of partial convergence. Population, Space and Place, 28(3)

Surkyn, J., Gadeyne, S., & Verhaeghe, P-P.
Deconstructing duration of residence and the Migrant Mortality Advantage: Migration bonus, paradox or artefact?

Surkyn, J., Ahmad Yar, A. W., Ceylan, D., Vanthomme, K., & Bircan, T. (2022).
An analysis of mortality rates for estimating undocumented migrants in Belgium. Leuven: HumMingbird Project 870661 - Horizon 2020.

Surkyn, J.
Non-register migrant populations in Belgium and Brussels: mortality based estimation. Doctoraal proefschrift voor het behalen van de graad van doctor in de Sociologie. Brussel: Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

The author & project

Johan Surkyn works as a sociologist and demographer at Interface Demography/Vrije Universiteit Brussel for the last 35 years. His field of expertise stretches from migration and population projection to housing, household demography and the use of administrative data for social and demographic research. In this study, the link between formal demography (life table methods) and migration is the crucial element for estimating the invisible Brussels' population.

Contact details and more information are found here

Prospective research

Through the Prospective Research programme, the Brussels-Capital Region is hoping to fund research projects from a dual perspective: to provide a solid regional prospective vision; to build solutions to the specific challenges it will face in the years to come. The solutions proposed by the funded projects must take into account Brussels' urban complexity as well as the Region's environmental, social and economic transition objectives. The programme targets researchers in human science as much as researchers in exact or applied science.

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