

Designing a Survey on Illegal Migration in Italy: Methodological Issues and Preliminary Results

*Un'Indagine sull'Immigrazione Irregolare in Italia:
Aspetti Metodologici e Primi Risultati*

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Riassunto: Nell'ultimo decennio il fenomeno dell'immigrazione irregolare in Italia ha assunto un'importanza sempre maggiore ed ha sollecitato l'interesse di studiosi di varie discipline. Malgrado ciò, ad oggi manca uno studio approfondito delle sue caratteristiche e delle motivazioni che inducono alla scelta di migrare irregolarmente. Per sopperire alla carenza di dati ufficiali, che periodicamente danno contezza delle attività di contrasto, fornendo esclusivamente statistiche sul numero degli ingressi per nazione di origine, il presente lavoro illustra una ricerca¹ appena conclusa presso l'Università di Bari, dove un gruppo di ricercatori ha realizzato un'indagine sull'immigrazione irregolare in Italia, evidenziando le peculiarità, le motivazioni e le principali caratteristiche demografiche e socio-economiche di un campione di 920 clandestini.

Keywords: Irregular migration, sampling design, questionnaire.

1. Introduction and background

The aim of the paper is to provide a contribution to the currently scant knowledge on the phenomenon of illegal migration to Italy. By definition, it is impossible to exactly measure the scale of the phenomenon of illegal migration to a country. Therefore, although national and international statistical institutions usually provide accurate statistics concerning population of legal migrants, they only estimate those of illegal migrants. In Italy, the most qualified statistical source in the field of irregular migration is the Ministry of Interior Affairs, which collects data on the flows of migrants apprehended while attempting to cross the Italian borders, with a break-down by country of origin. According to the most recent Caritas² Yearbook (2003), in 2002 border controls in Italy seized 149,783 foreign citizens without valid visa and

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² Caritas is a Catholic non -profit organization which publishes statistics collected by the Italian Ministry of Interiors.

expulsions were effective in 59 out of 100 cases. From Jan to Sept 2003, a team of researchers at the Department of Economics, University of Bari commissioned AGIMI - Otranto³ a data collection regarding the phenomenon of illegal migration in Italy. The product of this joint effort is the Survey on Illegal Migration in Italy (henceforth SIMI), which contains the main demographic, economic and social characteristics of a sample of 920 irregular migrants, as well as their motivations and future expectations, by means of a questionnaire designed on purpose. To our knowledge, this is the first experiment ever realised at the national level, with the characteristics that will be later described.

2. The sampling design

The sampling unit is a clandestine, who is 18 years old or older and has been on the Italian territory for a period no longer than 6 months. According to the current law on migration, (passed in 1998 and partly modified in July 2002), migrants without valid documentation and stopped by the Italian Police Forces are taken to a *hosting centre*, (called Reception Centre or Centre of Temporary Permanence, depending on their status, henceforth RC or CTP). Usually, these are camps in which clandestines are kept for a period of maximum 60 days, in order to be identified and to apply for political asylum or to obtain a rejection decree with accompaniment at the closest border or an immediate expulsion order, in which case they must leave the country within three days. Therefore, given our definition of the sampling unit, a hosting center corresponds to a suitable place to build the sample and collect the interviews. According to the Ministry of Interior Affairs, in 2002 the Italian CTP hosted overall 17,466 individuals; 23.5% in Apulia, 30.4% in Sicily, 14.9% in Lombardy, 12.8% in Lazio, 9.4% in Piedmont, 4.5% in Calabria and the remaining 4.4 percent in Emilia Romagna. However, apprehended clandestines are only a small portion of the population of illegal migrants, whose dimension is difficult to quantify. Actually, the presence of clandestines in a hosting centre is a function of two events: first, they crossed Italian borders without a visa, second, those new incomers were apprehended by the public order. Thus, interviewing only clandestines in hosting centres would completely loose an important side of the phenomenon under investigation and would therefore produce a relevant bias. As a consequence, a careful sampling design was needed, starting from the choice of the observational unit and the questionnaire building. Moreover, in order to minimize the non response rate and the risk of false answers, we interviewed clandestines in two different types of meeting points: i) in hosting centers (both CTP and RC), after a sufficient number of days from their arrival; ii) in other selected meeting points (as helping centres, public canteen, voluntary services, HC henceforth) where clandestines to be interviewed might be more willing to co-operate, without losing their anonymity. In both cases clandestines should have reached Italy by no longer than 6 months. This short period minimises the measurement error when they were asked to recall previous events. Note that one of the aims of the survey is to obtain an accurate recollection of earnings and expenditures before migration, as well as future expectations before departure. Similarly to most micro-economic surveys, the frame used for SIMI has a *two-stage design*. In the first stage, we listed the main CTP/RC/HC in the Italian regions

³ AGIMI is a multicultural and multi-religion non-profit organization assisting migrants throughout Italy, and beyond.

affected the most by the phenomenon: Apulia, Calabria, Sicily and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In the second stage, after having suitably selected ten Centers, in the chosen regions, in which interviews had to be carried out, in order to select clandestines to be interviewed, we drew a *random sample*. Due to the extreme variability of the phenomenon, a previous hypothesis of an “a priori” composition of the sample⁴, was abandoned in favour of what we called a “dynamic” sample, i.e. a methodical sample built on the presence of clandestines in the hosting centers/meeting points at the time of the interviews. Such a methodological approach is not completely new: it moves from Blangiardo (1996), who proposed the “sampling for meeting points” while managing with a survey on the presence of foreign people in Italy. It is also a special case of Fabbri (1989) technique called “sampling by area”, recognized as the best technique available when the population size is unknown and/or a name list is unavailable. Following the two stage design, we collected 920 interviews with such a distribution by centre: 27.17% at I.C.S. HC (Gorizia), 18.15% at Caritas RC-S. Anna (Crotone), 12.17% at Lorizzonte RC-Squinzano (Lecce), 11.85% at HC Coop.Interetnica –Bari, 9.13% of them at Regina Pacis CTP-S. Foca (Lecce), 8.91% at Croce Blu HC-Foggia, 8.48% at Spirito Santo-Caritas RC-Vittoria (Ragusa), 1.96% in the RC-Borgomezzanone (Foggia), 1.63 % at Caritas HC-Crotone, 0.54% at Don Tonino Bello RC-Otranto (Lecce). People interviewed had 55 different nationalities. After the data collection, in order to measure the sample representativeness, we summed up the number of clandestines hosted in the selected CTP/RC/HC in the period Jan-Sept 2003. The referring population was made by 8,502 clandestines, therefore the sampling ratio is 10.82%, while the sampling error rate is 3.05%, with a confidence level of 95%. As shown in Table 1, the sampling ratio by nationality goes from about 2% to 50%. This high variability is due to several reasons: i) a few clandestines could have not been interviewed, as some of them stayed in the centre for a too short period of time (some just for few hours) or they did not suit our definition of SIMI statistical unit; ii) some of them refused to answer either moved by mistrust or for linguistic difficulties; iii) it might be the case that some clandestines could have lain on their nationality either to the Police (so affecting N_i) or to the interviewers. To minimize such bias, we carried out a post stratification.

Table 1: *Sample representativeness and post-stratification: main nationalities*

Nationality	n_i	N_i	$f_i=n_i/N_i$ (%)	weight	Nationality	N_i	N_i	$f_i=n_i/N_i$ (%)	weight
Iraq	87	1,018	8.55	1.27	Senegal	44	87	50.57	0.21
Liberia	83	780	10.64	1.02	Turkey	44	273	16.12	0.67
Sudan	50	360	13.89	0.78	Others	565	5,615	10.06	-
Morocco	47	369	12.74	0.85	Total	920	8,502	10.82	-

3. The questionnaire

The main aim of the survey on illegal migration (SIMI) is the measurement and understanding of: 1) living standards before migration, 2) expectation for future living

⁴ This technique needs a prior knowledge of the population main characteristics, but this information was not available. Previous annual flows by nationality could only be partially helpful, as there is no guarantee that the phenomenon cyclically repeats from year to year.

standards in the country of destination, 3) costs and individual measure of risks and uncertainty beard in migrating. The questionnaire designed is made of 95 questions organized in 5 sections. The question order, the questionnaire length and its contents were carefully analyzed, balancing the research interests with the psychological condition of the interviewed. The first section (Section A) contains personal data. Section B collects the main demographic characteristics of the interviewed, starting from various life quality indices at the country of origin till his educational level, age, health status, type of work and acquired skills before migrating. A particular interest is paid to personal or family earnings and consumption expenditures. In Section C the current financial condition is under examination; a group of questions also investigate the financial sources needed to migrate. Section D aims to quantify income expectations, to identify the final destination and future projects. Section E investigates motivation, travel mode and costs to migrate. The structure of the questionnaire and the answer grids provided are based on the results of a preliminary exercise run in Sept 2000 (see Chiuri and Ferri, 2001).

4. Discussion

In carrying out the research, we had to face some expected and unexpected problems and discussing some of them could raise some interesting issues. First of all, we have to stress that the literature in the field of irregular migration is relatively recent and still contains lots of open questions. Moreover, the phenomenon of illegal migration is highly unstable: migration flows change for size and composition by country of origin and destination. As a consequence, the collection of SIMI required, for various aspects, an innovative design since a “dynamic” sampling method had to be experimented just to be able to change the model as soon as relevant changes occurred in the planned frame. Another important remark concerns the quality of the information collected, interviewing clandestines in a psychological condition of migrant apprehended after a long and uncomfortable journey and forced to face a hostile reality. In such a situation it is very difficult to obtain co-operation in filling a questionnaire, even for research purposes. All these puzzles have been pointed out to show the objective difficulties and the singularity of the research conducted. However, in spite of these drawbacks, the analysis of the information collected reveals interesting aspects about the demographic, economic and social characteristics of the clandestines interviewed and enlightens on their future expectation and motivations to migrate.

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