

NAVIGATING DATA CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL MIGRANT INTEGRATION

A Policy Brief by MigrationWork,
in collaboration with the European Network of Migrant Women & Eurocities



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INTRODUCTION

Cities are at the forefront of receiving migrants and refugees, and they play a significant role in providing services to support their integration. Understanding who these groups are – their numbers, characteristics, needs, and the challenges they face – is essential for designing effective integration policies.

However, despite widespread consensus on the importance of data to manage migration effectively¹, local authorities often face challenges in collecting, managing and sharing data on migrants and refugees, all while ensuring ethical standards and compliance with GDPR requirements.

This policy brief highlights why collecting reliable data on migrants and refugees is vital for effective planning and service provision. It provides practical guidance and recommendations to help municipalities strengthen their data systems, adopt ethical and compliant practices, and make evidence-based decisions that lead to better outcomes for both migrants and host communities.

WHY DOES DATA MATTER IN THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL MIGRANT INTEGRATION?

Data is essential for helping authorities identify inequalities and discrimination; what is not measured often remains invisible and is unlikely to be prioritised. In this sense, data and evidence form the foundation of effective policy action. Relevant information on migrants and refugees may include individuals' nationality or country of birth, but it can also extend to parents' origin, ethnicity, language spoken, religion, and other characteristics that help cities understand social change.

Equally important is data on how public services operate and who they reach, which is crucial for improving service provision and addressing disparities. In Barcelona, for example, data revealed significant gaps in the presence of foreign residents in municipal sports facilities. In one neighbourhood, foreigners represent 31% of the population yet account for only 3% of those enrolled in the local sports centre.

Such data raises important questions about representation: whether all groups are accessing services or are represented within public institutions, who is being left out, and where policies are effective or falling short. With this understanding, cities can identify barriers related to access, affordability, communication, and more, and design targeted responses. Additionally, data also serves as a tool for coordination and efficiency across departments and teams, and can inform funding and resource allocation.

To be meaningful, data must be collected systematically and integrated into planning and evaluation processes. However, local authorities should remember that no data system is perfect; what matters is starting with the information available, using it responsibly, and continuously improving data quality and collection over time.

The importance of collecting data on migrant women and girls

Because data is never “neutral”² – it reflects societal priorities, norms, and biases – adopting an intersectional approach is essential. This approach recognises that people’s experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping identities – such as gender, migration status, age, or ethnicity – which together influence their opportunities and the barriers they face. Beyond data on migration status, collecting gender-disaggregated data allows authorities to see where policies may benefit or disadvantage different groups, and to design measures that promote greater fairness and equality.

HOW DO WE COLLECT DATA?

The question of why cities should collect data on migrants and refugees is closely linked to how this data is collected – including who is involved, where data comes from, what information is gathered, and how it is collected.

Who needs to be involved?

Effective data collection requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders. This includes those responsible for service design and delivery in areas such as health³, education, and housing; teams managing budget planning and resource allocation; researchers and policy analysts; and staff working on community engagement and collaboration with local organisations. Technical staff ensure data systems function properly, while input from both migrant and non-migrant communities helps ensure the data reflects real needs and experiences.

Where can data come from?

Cities should consider the effectiveness of a wide range of data sources, each of which has different strengths and limitations⁴:

- National or regional datasets, such as ID registers or the Census, provide broad basic information but can become quickly outdated;
- Big data⁵, like geolocation information, offers large-scale trends but little insight into individual needs;
- Statutory services – such as residence registration or access to municipal services – capturing information at the point of service use;
- The community sector often provides more detailed, trusted insights through close engagement with migrants and refugees;
- Surveys and targeted outreach, whether physical or digital, helps gather specific information on people's needs;
- Partnerships, panels, and advisory groups can support coordination, communication, and interpretation of data⁶.

What data should be collected?

The data collected should cover both general and specific aspects of people's lives. This includes basic demographic information and key metrics, as well as service-specific data related to areas such as housing, health, education, and leisure. Collecting feedback on services, as well as broader life indicators and outcomes, helps assess effectiveness and equity. It is also important to capture people's short-, medium-, and long-term aspirations and feelings to better understand their experiences and support meaningful policy and service improvements.

How do we collect data?

Data collection about migrants and refugees should be seen as a long-term project requiring careful planning and coordination. This includes establishing a dedicated coordination body, clear leadership and decision-making structures, defined parameters for data collection, sufficient budget, and mechanisms for feedback and review.

When collecting migrant data, several key considerations are essential. These include defining the core data to be collected and deciding how it will be gathered – whether self-reported, assisted, through interviews, face-to-face interactions, online forms, or paper-based methods. Language and translation support must be addressed to ensure accessibility, while storage systems should prioritise safety, confidentiality, and secure data sharing along with the ability to be flexible and evolve. A clear code of practice should guide the process (to guarantee aspects such as independence, clarity of methods, informed consent and equal treatment), and migrants themselves should be actively involved to ensure the data collection is respectful, relevant, and effective.

HOW DO WE SHARE DATA? DOES GDPR REALLY STOP US SHARING DATA?

Once data is collected, cities must consider how it will be shared internally across departments and externally with partners⁷, while ensuring compliance with data protection regulations such as the GDPR (EU Regulation N°2016/679).

Before sharing data, local authorities should consider:

1. **What is your legal status under GDPR?** Are you the controller of the data (and therefore who determines the purpose and the means) or are you the processor of the data (acting under the instructions of the controller)?
2. **What data are you sharing?** If it is personal data, that can be pseudonymised (to which GDPR applies) or anonymised (including aggregated data), to which GDPR does not apply. Ask yourself: "May the goals of the initiative be met with non-personal data?"
3. **Why are you sharing it?** Public interest, legitimate interest and legal obligations are the primary legal bases for municipal data collection, and the law allows for data processing in these cases.
4. **Is the data being shared necessary and proportionate?** Data sharing must be limited to what is adequate, relevant and essential for the stated purpose.

Sharing data responsibly under GDPR

When sharing migrant data, municipalities must comply with GDPR to protect privacy and reduce risks. Internally, data should only be used for specific, compatible purposes, minimised to what is necessary, and documented through agreements such as Data Sharing Agreements or Memoranda of Understanding. Transparency is essential to ensure migrants understand how their data may be used.

Externally, authorities must conduct due diligence to work only with trusted partners who have strong security measures and clearly defined responsibilities. Routine external sharing should be governed by formal agreements outlining the legal basis, purpose limitations, data minimisation, security standards, and accountability. Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs) help identify and mitigate risks to individuals.

GDPR compliance, rather than being a barrier, is an opportunity for municipalities to manage data responsibly, protect vulnerable populations, and use information to improve services and enhance policymaking.

CONCLUSION

Collecting and using data on migrants and refugees is essential for cities to design effective policies, allocate resources fairly, and ensure that public services reach everyone.

When data is gathered systematically, disaggregated to reflect different experiences, and shared responsibly in line with data protection regulations, it becomes a practical tool for identifying inequalities, improving service delivery, and strengthening coordination across departments and partners.

The experiences of cities across Europe show that ethical, intersectional, and well-governed data systems not only protect the rights of migrants but also help local authorities plan better, respond more effectively, and build more inclusive communities.

Ultimately, investing in good data practices enables cities to understand their populations more accurately and to create policies that support both migrants and the wider community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 See data as a long-term project – it will never be perfect, but it can always be improved.

Cities should treat data collection as an evolving process, investing in incremental improvements rather than waiting for a perfect system to be in place.

2 Strengthen coordination across departments and partners.

A central coordination structure or steering group ensures shared standards, avoids duplication, and supports consistent approaches across departments and services.

3 Allocate adequate resources for sustained data work.

Sufficient funding, time, and staffing are essential for maintaining robust, ethical, and high-quality data systems. Without dedicated resources, cities risk inconsistent practices, outdated tools, and reduced capacity to use data effectively.

4 Provide proper training for staff at all levels.

Staff need continuous training not only on technical skills and IT systems, but also on GDPR obligations, ethical considerations, and cultural sensitivity when gathering data.

5 Engage migrants and community organisations throughout the data cycle.

Cities should meaningfully involve migrants in designing, testing, and interpreting data collection tools to ensure questions are relevant, respectful, and accessible. Working with civil society organisations strengthens outreach, improves representativeness, and enriches qualitative insights. These partnerships build trust, increase participation, and help ensure that data collection reflects real experiences and needs.

6 Adopt an intersectional approach to ensure no group is left invisible.

Data should be disaggregated by meaningful characteristics such as gender, migration status, and ethnicity to capture diverse experiences. This helps cities identify specific barriers faced by subgroups – particularly women and girls – and design targeted, evidence-based interventions.

7 Don't just collect data – analyse it and use it to improve services and migrant inclusion.

Data must inform decision-making, resource allocation, and service improvements, not sit unused in administrative systems. Regular analysis and integrating findings into planning ensures that data leads to concrete improvements in people's lives.

8 Ensure ethical, transparent, and GDPR-compliant practices.

Clear communication about why data is collected, how it is used, and how privacy is protected strengthens trust among migrant communities. Municipalities should employ mechanisms such as DPIAs, data-sharing agreements, and robust anonymisation practices to safeguard personal information and minimise risks.

9 Develop an agreed Code of Practice.

Developing a Code of Practice, encompassing standards and core principles, agreed by all relevant stakeholders, is a vital step in effectively steering all aspects of a data collection project.

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CONSOLIDATE

Led by Eurocities, **CONSOLIDATE** will set up Communities of Practice that take stock of the most efficient tools and transferrable best practices; and accompany – through financial and technical support – 12 local authorities in designing innovative policy pilots for more effective support in the following areas:

1. Effective labour market integration for refugees and other newcomers.
2. Local support instruments for refugees towards housing autonomy.
3. One Stop Shops as an accessible and efficient model for coordinated service provision.

Furthermore, **CONSOLIDATE** will provide training to partner and external cities and identify best practices in responding to the cross-cutting challenges of

- Collecting and sharing client data in integration support.
- Developing women-centred approaches to integration.
- Managing the transition from emergency to a strategic approach to integration

CONSOLIDATE aims to:

1. Support development and implementation of new and more effective local integration strategies.
2. Identify and disseminate best practice and key knowledge to improve local integration policies.
3. Improve transnational engagement and cooperation between integration stakeholders.
4. Increase engagement of migrants and their organisations at national level.

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