Seeking the views of irregular migrants: Survey background, rationale and methodology

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* Please note that the views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department.
This paper is one of a series of occasional papers produced as part of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection’s Irregular Migration Research Program (Research Program).

The Research Program is intended to strengthen the evidence base on irregular migration, and is built on research framed in an open, inquiring manner that is objective and non-partisan. More information about the Research Program can be found at: http://www.immi.gov.au/business-services/irregular-migration-research/

The Occasional Paper Series aims to provide information on, and analysis of, specific irregular migration issues of relevance to Australia, within a broader migration and/or global context.

The opinions, comments and analyses expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In August 2012, the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (the Department) established an Irregular Migration Research Program (Research Program) to identify and address the knowledge gaps in irregular migration research, with a particular focus on placing Australia’s experience in a broader global and migration context.

2. The current discourse on irregular migration, and the resulting policy responses, has been based on limited, and mainly qualitative, research and evidence. There is much reliance on assumptions. Addressing this gap in knowledge and research is a policy priority, particularly given the changing nature of irregular maritime migration to Australia. The increased volume and diversity of irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs)\(^1\), and the rising human, political, economic and social costs, highlight the need for a greater understanding of the issues.

3. An innovative quantitative survey of IMAs who have been granted a permanent visa in Australia has been undertaken as part of the Irregular Migration Research Program. This survey is the first of its kind in the Australian context and provides a useful empirical evidence base on IMA decision making, which highlights the complex and multi-faceted decisions underpinning why and how people travel to Australia as IMAs.

4. This paper provides background on the survey rationale and methodology. Due to the sensitivity inherent in seeking honest, candid information about experiences that may have involved trauma, vulnerability and high risk behaviour, a survey approach involving the use of tablet computers was employed with success. The use of technology allowed for greater anonymity when responding to questions on sensitive issues and increased the likelihood of more truthful responses.

5. Results from the survey indicate that this empirical evidence provides valuable insight into the role of non-migrants in decision making, migrants’ perceptions of Australia, and the experiences of IMAs in the transit phase of their journey to Australia. A separate occasional paper provides analysis of key results of the IMA survey. Reference to survey results in this paper have been limited to discussion of the methodology, and more specifically, to highlight where the methodology has proved successful and not so successful.

6. The candid nature of the results, and in particular the willingness of respondents to have acknowledged high risk and unlawful behaviour, indicates that the survey methodology was on the whole successful. The limitations, however, of seeking to capture complex information via a quantitative survey are also clear, particularly in relation to detailed questions on the extent to which respondents relied on various forms of information when making decisions. There would be merit in undertaking supplementary qualitative research on the more complex aspects of decision making that the survey instrument was unable to fully explore.

7. The survey results offer insights into a range of areas in which further research activity would be valuable for creating a solid base of measurement and analysis to inform policy and program considerations. Future surveys conducted on an annual basis would assist in improved analysis of changes in dynamics over time.

\(^1\) The term ‘irregular maritime arrival’ has been used in this paper given that the survey participants were, at the time of their arrival, referred to as IMAs. The current term is ‘unauthorised maritime arrival’.
1. INTRODUCTION

The number of IMAs to Australia has increased over time, to the point where Australia is experiencing the highest level of sustained IMAs in history. The attempt to reach Australia by sea is often an arduous and perilous option that endangers lives. The human cost of irregular maritime migration to Australia is significant. To date, it is estimated that over 1000 lives have been lost at sea since October 2001.  

As a signatory to the Refugees Convention and its optional protocol, Australia faces a range of policy challenges, including finding a balance between its international obligations to protect refugees and the imperative to manage its borders in a regulated manner. Not surprisingly, the issue remains extremely topical, as reflected by the public discourse in Australia.

In August 2012, the Department established an Irregular Migration Research Program (Research Program) to identify and address the knowledge gaps in irregular migration research, with a particular focus on placing Australia’s experience in a broader global and migration context. An underlying principle of the Research Program is that the research be framed in an open, inquiring manner that is objective and non-partisan.

The Research Program has been established as a multi-layered and integrated program including in-house research and analysis, commissioned research, a small grants program, a multi-year research partnership arrangement with the Australian National University and a series of occasional papers.

A cornerstone of the commissioned research component of the Research Program is the IMA Survey, a large-scale quantitative survey conducted by McNair Ingenuity Research in 2013 on behalf of the Department. The survey sought the views of IMAs who were granted protection visas between July 2011 and December 2012. By drawing on the personal experiences of people who had taken the journey to Australia by sea, the survey was intended to provide a better understanding of why and how people decided to leave their home or host countries and come to Australia, including in relation to economic, family, protection and other reasons.

The survey did not consider substantive post-arrival issues such as refugee processing, detention, settlement or integration; seeking views of initial experiences only. The Building a New Life in Australia (BANLIA) survey, being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies on behalf of the Department is focussing on post-arrival issues faced by humanitarian entrants, including IMAs. For further information on BANLIA, see: http://www.immi.gov.au/media/research/lsrm/.

The IMA survey results are intended to begin to provide an empirical evidence base for policy, and point to future research needs. The results should ideally provide a base to inform qualitative and further quantitative research. The IMA survey is also intended to supplement surveys of potential irregular migrants in home, host and transit countries so that we can better understand how people assess and re-assess their migration options in dynamic and challenging environments prior to (and during) their journeys.

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2 Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers (2012)
In respect of future IMA surveys undertaken in Australia, there will undoubtedly be elements that will be refined and improved over time as the evidence base is enhanced, including in the form of a time series dataset.

This paper is the first in a series of papers on the IMA survey, and has been primarily written as a means of providing detailed information on the survey rationale as well as the specific methodology adopted – both of which provide important context to the survey results. The second section below briefly reviews some of the knowledge gaps related to research on irregular migrants’ decision making, as outlined in the first of the Research Program’s Occasional Paper Series, Establishing an Evidence-Based for Future Policy Development on Irregular Migration to Australia. The third section discusses the rationale for undertaking the survey as well as the specific methodology adopted to seek the views of migrants on the sensitive issue of irregular migration. The fourth and final section, before the paper concludes, examines whether the survey methodology was successful, highlighting limitations and areas for refinement.

2. KNOWLEDGE GAPS

There is an acknowledged need to establish a more sophisticated understanding of irregular migration within the region and beyond as a means of enabling Australia to better respond to the significant policy and program challenges posed by irregular maritime migration to Australia.

To date, much of the discourse on irregular migration to Australia is based on the assumption that the flows are the result of forced migration or is underpinned, in the case of some citizenship groups, by the assumption that some IMAs are economic migrants and not refugees. There are indicators that suggest that the composition of the current irregular migration flows arriving in Australia is more complex and therefore require further investigation.

In the first occasional paper, the paper’s authors (Koser and McAuliffe) identified four main areas that require greater attention if an adequate evidence base on the drivers and possible deterrents of irregular migration is to be established: the decision to leave the country of origin; the choice of destination; transit phase; and returns. Koser and McAuliffe also argued that the gathering of evidence needs to better account for a range of variables, including citizenship and country of origin.

The decision to leave
Greater focus needs to be paid to identify the reasons why a person may choose to migrate irregularly, with persecution and protection issues being one subset of the many, often interrelated reasons. Perhaps equally important is an examination of the decision to stay, whether that is related to ‘involuntary immobility’ or ‘immobility by choice’ (and the related decision making continuum).

Choice of destination
Researching whether and how irregular migrants select their destination has implications for assessing the extent to which policy settings influence decision making. It can also provide insights into designing effective information campaigns.

Transit
The policy relevance of understanding the transit phase of irregular migration includes helping identify

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3 Koser and McAuliffe (2013)
4 Carling (2002)
5 Adhikari (2012)
and provide assistance and protection for vulnerable migrants in transit, targeting information campaigns in transit countries where migration decisions can evolve, and informing bilateral agreements between destination and transit countries.

Returns

The return of people found not to be in need of protection is an integral part of an effective migration regime. More research into decision making in relation to voluntary returns would assist in informing policy responses. In addition, a research focus on the sustainability of returns has the potential to calibrate policy to reduce the likelihood of migrants feeling compelled to re-migrate immediately upon return.

To create an evidence base that addresses the knowledge gaps identified above and that will in turn support the development of effective, targeted strategies and policy, the Research Program continues to examine existing assumptions through research and analysis. In doing so, a key objective is the development of an enhanced understanding of irregular migration through multi-disciplinary analysis that is not bound by the public discourse dichotomy of ‘genuine refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’.

3. SEEKING THE VIEWS OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS

In the context of the broader research into irregular migration, and the drivers underpinning such movement, there is a general absence of research into migrants’ decision making.6

There are likely to be a number of reasons for the current research gap. Firstly, the methodological challenges associated with seeking the views of irregular migrants themselves are not to be underestimated, and were acknowledged in the first occasional paper (Koser and McAuliffe, 2013). These challenges are discussed in more detail below.

Secondly, the perception that ‘forced’ migration is occurring, and the associated assumption that migrants have a lack of agency, effectively renders research on migrant decision making as largely irrelevant. There are two points worth making in regard to forced migration:

1. There is no doubt that some migration is forced. This is particularly relevant to forms of human trafficking. It is also highly relevant to situations of war and violent conflict, such as have been experienced in more recent times in countries such as Syria, Libya and Sudan. The outpouring of thousands of people across borders to escape conflict is unfortunately all too familiar. The nature of irregular migration beyond immediate movement, including in relation to its intersection with people smuggling, however, raises a series of questions of choice and agency.

2. The limited research that has been done on migrant decision making indicates that as a process, it is complex and multi-dimensional.7 Perhaps this complexity, together with the potential for unpicking of key assumptions underpinning how researchers and policymakers think about irregular migration as it relates to asylum seekers (including the forced migration framework), is likely to result in findings that may risk offence.8 Critically examining the issues of migrant choice and agency in this environment is likely to be confronting.

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6 Koser and McAuliffe (2013)
7 Koser (2011)
8 Koser (2013), pg 19
3.1 Irregular migrant decision making – methodological challenges

Conducting research among potential and actual irregular migrants themselves is difficult from a methodological perspective. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, there is a genuine feasibility issue. It can be difficult to locate irregular migrants for research purposes. This places limitations on methodological approaches, including as it relates to the feasibility or otherwise of large-scale, quantitative analysis. Most research, therefore, has been qualitative in nature involving, for example, structured interview and focus group techniques.

Secondly, locating irregular migrants who are willing to engage with researchers, particularly in light of the sensitive and profound nature of their experiences poses additional challenges. The ‘irregular’ nature of travel, and the related risks that people are either considering (potential migrants) or have undertaken (actual migrants), would be likely to raise questions in people’s minds as to the risks to themselves (and perhaps their families) in engaging with researchers.

Thirdly, and given the sensitive nature of the topic, people may be tempted to misrepresent their motivations for moving. This is more likely to be the case in situations involving interviewers who are authority figures of one kind or another (e.g. government authorities, community leaders/members, etc.). The inclination to temper views or provide more socially acceptable responses when placed in this type of interview situation is a well-documented issue in social research.9

Finally, understanding decision making among actual migrants is more difficult because it relies on reflection and post facto rationalization. This is particularly likely to be the case for migrants who have been through some form of processing (e.g. refugee status determination processing) and have been granted a visa (including protection visas), regardless of the complexity of the decision making processes prior to and during their migration journey. In contrast, these issues are less likely to be relevant to potential irregular migrants, although other challenges emerge, such as the likelihood (or otherwise) of following through on stated intentions to migrate.

3.2 IMA Survey Methodology

The IMA survey sought to address the knowledge gaps identified above by gathering information on the experiences of people who have travelled to Australia as an IMA. By drawing on their personal experiences, the survey aimed to support a better understanding of IMA decision making and the realities of their journey.

3.2.1 Survey rationale

Large-scale quantitative surveys of migrants provide useful sources of information and evidence for researchers and policymakers. Surveys of migrants covering pre-arrival and post-arrival issues are routinely conducted as a basis for research and analysis.10 In the Australian context, this has included surveying migrants who have arrived via managed migration programs on aspects of decision making as well as on employment and settlement outcomes; the three Longitudinal Surveys of Immigrants to Australia (LSIAs) included several waves of each survey process. To date, LSIA surveying has been

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9 Bowling (2005)
10 Huddleston and Tjaden (2012); McKenzie and Mistiaen (2007); Jasso, Massey, Rosenzweig and Smith (2003)
conducted between 1993 and 2007, with particular emphasis on post-arrival settlement and integration.11

The conduct of a quantitative survey of IMAs, with a specific focus on pre-arrival experiences, in much the same way as other migrant surveys are conducted, was considered an important means to build an aspect of the evidence base. Surveys of this nature are able to examine patterns, including by determining how widely certain processes are undertaken or characteristics feature in a particular process.12 As Iosifides, in his examination of qualitative methods in migration studies, asserts:

...quantitative methods are of great help for the establishment of...more or less stable empirical patterns within specific time and space boundaries....they orientate social researchers to ‘go deeper’ and try to elucidate the specific causal factors...that made them possible. Employing quantitative methods in this way contributes significantly to the overall purpose of critical realist social research, which is to address causality and explain social reality.13

As discussed throughout the paper, the quantitative dataset from the IMA survey is intended to provide evidence to inform and underpin further research on this topic. In other words, the empirical evidence it provides will enable researchers to ‘go deeper’ in their examination of the issues.

As highlighted in section 3.1 above, locating migrants can be difficult. This is particularly the case for small populations such as IMAs in the Australian community, given their very small numbers relative to the overall population.14 Generally, researchers must rely on different sampling techniques in an effort to sample such small populations.15 In the case of the IMA survey, however, the existence of a sample frame drawn from administrative records greatly enhanced the feasibility of conducting a large-scale quantitative survey. Part of the rationale, therefore, was in recognition that this type of empirical research is generally conducted by organisations that have access to such sample frames. Discussion of the sample frame is included in section 3.2.5 below.

Unlike ‘regular’ migrants, surveying people who have undertaken irregular journeys, possibly involving unlawful and high risk behaviour, required a methodology that could seek to minimise the range of challenges outlined above. A number of specific measures were put into place to achieve this. The most important measure involved incorporating relevant technology into the survey methodology.

3.2.2 Utilising technology to support self-completion

Due to the challenges inherent in seeking honest, candid information about experiences that may have involved trauma, vulnerability, unlawful and high risk behaviour, specific measures were employed as a means of reducing response bias and non-sampling error.

Firstly, the survey was designed as a self-completion survey. The self-completion of sensitive questions has been found to increase the level of reporting in a survey by reducing the social desirability effects relative to the administration of the same questions by an interviewer.16 Given the

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11 DIAC (2007)
14 Between July 2008 and July 2013, just over 44,000 IMAs arrived in Australia. At the end December 2012, the Australian population was estimated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to be just under 23 million.
15 Sampling techniques include two-phase sampling, snowball sampling, and time and space sampling (also known as intercept point sampling, location sampling, or aggregation point sampling) – see McKenzie and Mistiaen (2007).
16 Tourangeau and Smith (1996)
sensitive nature of some of the questions, the potential for interviewer bias to affect the results was a significant issue. Interviewer bias can be due to the actual characteristics of the interviewer (e.g. sex, age, perceived social status) or because respondents may be reluctant to reveal beliefs unlikely to be endorsed by an interviewer.\(^{17}\)

In the IMA survey context, a traditional interviewer survey approach involving bilingual interviewers would be likely to have a potentially significant impact on bias. This is, in part, due to the specific language groups required to support an interviewer mode of delivery. Given the history of some IMA groups, the bilingual interviewers required to conduct the interviews would (for some key citizenship groups) be likely to have their own experiences and views of irregular maritime migration, either due to their own personal experiences (they may have themselves been IMAs) or those of their family, friends or other community members. Self-completion allowed for much reduced interaction with an interviewer.

Self-completion can be undertaken via different modes, including paper self-administered questionnaires, computer-assisted survey instruments (CATI), interactive voice recognition (IVR) and web-based administration. Paper-based surveys were considered less attractive than other modes, including because of costs (e.g. printing, handling, data entry) but also because of question order effects and non-sampling error.\(^{18}\) When other modes of self-completion have been compared, variation has been found, with web-based administration increasing the level of reporting of sensitive information and reporting accuracy relative to conventional CATI and IVR.\(^{19}\)

The use of computer-based technology involving self-completion was chosen as it has been found to be effective in eliciting honest, open answers from participants in other surveys involving highly sensitive issues.\(^{20}\) For example, in a survey on rape in South Africa, participants were asked questions via a tablet computer-based survey on their experiences as both a perpetrator, and a victim, of rape.\(^{21}\) The results showed that a substantial proportion of men indicated that they had perpetrated raped, and was in contrast to studies based on other research methodologies.

The IMA survey was completed by respondents using a tablet computer pre-loaded with the questionnaire translated into several languages, including the primary languages of the main IMA groups: Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Hazaragi, Tamil, Urdu as well as English. The survey instrument was translated from English into the six other languages by accredited translators and then reviewed.

The technology allowed respondents to switch between languages in ‘real time’. A ‘skip’ option allowed participants to skip questions they did not want to answer. The respondent was in control of the pace of the survey and was able to pause, reread a question, or think about an answer, a factor which has been seen to improve the quality of answers in self-administered questionnaires.\(^{22}\)

In recognition of potential literacy and technological access issues, bilingual assistants were engaged to provide initial guidance to the participant on how to complete the questionnaire on the tablet computer. The assistants remained available to provide assistance for completion of a question if requested.\(^{23}\) This allowed participants to complete the survey anonymously but also recognised that a

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\(^{17}\) Bowling (2005)
\(^{18}\) Ibid
\(^{19}\) Kreuter, Presser and Tourangeau (2008)
\(^{20}\) Tourangeau and Smith (1996), Seebregtsa et al (2009)
\(^{21}\) Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, and Dunkel (2013)
\(^{22}\) Hox, J., Kef, S., and de Leeuw (2003)
\(^{23}\) A small number of respondents were interviewed because of literacy issues (see discussion in subsection 3.2.6 below).
small proportion of respondents may require additional assistance, including because of potential literacy issues.

The approach involving the provision of bilingual assistants recognised that an unsupported web-based administration would be likely to fail because of the particular characteristics of the population. While this approach may have had an impact on response bias due to the presence of an assistant, the reduced interaction (compared to a traditional interviewer) will have most likely had a positive impact on the reporting of sensitive responses.

All bilingual assistants were trained by the service provider McNair, including on the specifics of the project and its methodology, interviewing practice at the highest standard (a refresher course), and dealing with exceptional circumstances during collection.

Staff that worked on the project were also required to attend the New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) Seminar on the Core Concepts in Working with People from Refugee Backgrounds.

Computer-based self-completion also assists in reducing non-sampling errors, such as missing values and incorrect coding, compared to other survey delivery methods.24

3.2.3 Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality throughout the entire survey process was a primary concern to the Department. A small number of departmental and McNair Ingenuity Research (McNair) staff had access to the sample. All responses to the survey were de-identified, and the use of technology (as discussed above) reinforced the anonymous nature of the survey.

As members of the market research industry association in Australia (AMSRO), McNair is bound to comply with a range of specific regulations around privacy, including taking reasonable steps to protect any identified information that it holds from misuse and loss and from unauthorised access, modification, disclosure and transfer. In particular, in conjunction with accreditation under AS ISO 20252, the International Standard for Market and Social Research, McNair has access to concessions under the Privacy Act, by virtue of the Market and Social Research Privacy Principles. McNair assigned a unique and anonymous numerical identifier to all participants in order to ensure data remains non-identifiable. Upon completion of the survey fieldwork all identifiable information about participants was destroyed.

3.2.4 Survey instrument design and development

The survey instrument was designed to be as impartial as possible, with care taken to ensure questions were emotionally neutral. The questionnaire sought to avoid, as far as possible, questions that indicated pre-existing conclusions about the ethical dimension of behaviour associated with irregular migration.25

The draft survey instrument was the subject of consultations both internally within the Department, as well as externally via the Irregular Migration Research Advisory Group and the Irregular Migration Research International Reference Panel.26 The final survey instrument was delivered online with one

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25 See, for example, questions 39 and 40 on respondent practices in transit countries (included at Appendix B).
question (or sub-question) per online page, which enabled seamless loading of relevant questions. The final survey questions are included in the tables of results at Appendix B.

The survey was subjected to two testing phases: cognitive testing of the instrument (10 people) and pilot testing of the electronic delivery (51 people). The people who participated in the testing were drawn from the sample of IMAs and covered the relevant languages used for the survey.

Cognitive testing was focussed on ensuring acceptable levels of comprehension and to eliminate as much as possible any potential ambiguities in the survey instrument and response biases on the part of the participants. During this phase, a written questionnaire was administered by an interviewer with the assistance of an interpreter. After each section of structured questions, the interviewer asked a series of questions to gauge whether participants had understood the survey questions, and whether the questions had caused any level of discomfort, which might have led to dishonesty in answering the questions. Participants were also asked about their interpretation of questions, particularly in relation to specific words or phrases such as ‘people smuggler’, ‘agent’, ‘trigger’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘migrating’, ‘gender’, ‘religion’, ‘primary language’, ‘visa/visa status’ and ‘legal status/recognition’.

As a result of the cognitive testing phase, adjustments to questions were made to improve comprehension and clarity. This included the removal of many instances of Likert 5-point scales, which participants found difficult to understand (see the discussion on scales in Appendix A).

As cognitive testing was conducted on a paper survey, this posed some difficulties, particularly in relation to filter questions and routing. These issues were not relevant to the final survey instrument, which was delivered in an online format so seamlessly adjusted for filtering and question routing.

Following the results of the cognitive testing, the questionnaire was refined and shortened and programmed into an online format. The second phase of the survey was a technical pilot survey of a larger number of participants (51) in order to test the delivery of the refined questionnaire in the field, particularly in relation to delivery and data capture.

The proposed length of the questionnaire for the technical pilot phase was 45 minutes. The actual timings for the questionnaire in the technical pilot phase fell within the range of 30-90 minutes, with an average completion time of 56 minutes. Given the fact that there was only a very small amount of stated respondent burden (to do with perceived question repetition) and that the large majority of respondents were comfortable with the time taken to complete the survey, it was felt that this was a reasonable length of time and the questionnaire, therefore, was not shortened.

The issues of respondent fatigue due to survey length, and the potential for related increases in error toward the end of surveys, has been the subject of examination and discussion in the literature for many years. More recently, changes in survey design and technology, have resulted in researchers questioning these conclusions. A recent study provides evidence that the concerns about fatigue in the literature are possibly overstated with no clear decrease trend across surveys studied. In the case of the IMA survey, the clear and strong results at the end of the survey provide a possible indication that respondents were engaged in answering questions right up until the end of the survey.

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27 Filter questions are questions that ‘filter’ some of the sample out, leaving a sub-sample answering specific questions. For example, only respondents that lived in countries other than their countries of birth for more than 12 months were asked a series of questions on experiences living in a ‘host’ country.

28 Bradley and Daley (1994)

29 Hess, Hensher and Daly (2012)
No significant technical difficulties were reported with regards to the computer tablets used in the deployment of the questionnaire. The general interface, as well as specific aspects such as the size of the font on the screen, the rendering of foreign language fonts and the use of foreign language character keyboards generated no significantly adverse reactions amongst respondents.

### 3.2.5 Survey scope and coverage

The scope of the survey was all adult IMAs who had been issued a protection visa between 6 July 2011 and 31 December 2012 (inclusive), and were based in Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. This totalled 4,725 IMAs. The population was defined in order to minimise, as far as possible, problems of recall by limiting the scope to people who had recently travelled as IMAs. That said, issues of recall necessarily remain for this type of research.

IMAs who had not been granted a permanent visa during this period were out of scope. This approach ensured that all people in the survey had certainty regarding their status in Australia. The scope did not include people found not to be in need of protection, noting that merits and judicial review processes may take considerable periods of time, and a negative primary decision may not reflect a person’s final status.

The survey population did not include any people under the age of 18 due to the sensitivities around interviewing minors. People who were under the age of 18 at the time of travel but had since turned 18 were in scope.

The survey sample was drawn from the Department’s settlement database, with additional information, including contact details, retrieved from other administrative databases. The survey sample was drawn in two stages: the first group drawn on 16 April 2013, and was supplemented by a further group drawn in mid-June 2013.

A sample of 4,725 IMAs was selected from the databases. The sample was selected by citizenship (Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and other) and location (New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria).

The sampling rates varied between the strata because of, for example, variability in contact detail accuracy. To gain the same accuracy for estimates for a small population (e.g. Sri Lankans) a much higher sampling rate was required than for a larger population. The sample selection process has not introduced a bias in the IMA population estimates because the responses are appropriately weighted to take these differing sample rates into account. Further information is at Appendix A.

### 3.2.6 Limitation of the survey methodology

There are a number of methodological limitations entailed in the approach that was adopted. Issues of recall, for example, are likely to have an impact on survey results, however, this would equally be the case for other methodologies, such as structured interviews and focus groups.

The survey was a voluntary survey, and people in the sample were provided with information on the voluntary nature of the survey. They were also provided opportunities throughout the survey process of not participating, or of withdrawing agreement to participate, including during the survey itself. Four hundred and seven people declined to participate in the survey, which places some limitations on

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30 A sufficient sub-sample of Iraqis was not able to be obtained. Iraqis have been included in the ‘other’ category.
the survey methodology, although the responses have been weighted to take non-response into account.

A small proportion of respondents were reluctant to handle the tablet technology, preferring to sit with the assistant and indicate their responses in order to have the assistant enter them on their behalf. In addition, an even smaller proportion were not literate, which necessitated more involvement, but still neutral, mediation on the part of the assistant in order to have the questionnaire completed and submitted for analysis. 31 This latter aspect had been anticipated at the previous cognitive pilot testing phase, given that the population was considered likely to require some level of assistance with the technology. As few respondents required a greater level of assistance, any bias can be considered minor.

Effort has been expended on being able to elicit sensitive information through the use of computer-based self-completion surveying. The approach does not allow, however, for exploration of detailed questioning of aspects of respondents’ experiences, such as would be the case through structured interviewing. There would be merit, therefore, in drawing on the results of the survey to inform further in-depth research, including of specific demographic groups.

3.3 Ethics review

An ethics review of the project was undertaken through Bellberry Limited (Bellberry), a national, private not-for-profit human research ethics committee that provides an ethics review service on a fee-for-service basis. An ethics review of the project was undertaken in recognition of the potential sensitivities associated with conducting a survey of former IMAs, who have been in vulnerable situations during their migration journey.

The ethics review involved two stages: cognitive testing and pilot/main fieldwork stage. Approval for both stages was provided by Bellberry following a number of adjustments and clarifications.

Bellberry’s review recommended the provision to participants of information about the survey, including its purpose, who was conducting it (i.e. McNair on behalf of the Department), and why participants had been selected for the survey. This information was provided in the recruitment letter from McNair as well as a Participant Information Sheet to potential respondents. Bellberry also sought assurances that participants’ privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained; McNair provided such assurances, confirming compliance with associated requirements.

Participants were advised that they did not have to provide an answer to any question that would make them feel uncomfortable and assured that they could terminate the interview at any time without detriment, including that they would retain the $30 or $50 incentive offered to all participants. 32 McNair put in place processes to refer participants to appropriate support services in each state where the survey was conducted. Contact details of support services were provided to participants, and confirmation was obtained by McNair that participants would be able to utilise them.

31 The entering in of responses by bilingual assistants was done only where the respondent requested this assistance, and it was undertaken in direct response to respondents’ particular needs and circumstances. Five per cent requested full translation and a slightly large proportion requested data entry assistance of some kind.

32 A $30 incentive was provided to survey participants (pilot and main survey); a $50 incentive was provided to cognitive testing participants. Cognitive testing takes longer than survey completion.
In addition to McNair’s regular briefings and guidelines for dealing with sensitive research issues, McNair staff attended the New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors Seminar on the Core Concepts in Working with People from Refugee Backgrounds.

4. WAS THE METHODOLOGY SUCCESSFUL?

It can be very difficult to determine whether a particular methodology was successful or not. There are some indications that the survey methodology was effective in eliciting responses on sensitive issues, which was a primary objective.

An examination of responses to specific sensitive questions indicated that not insubstantial proportions of the sample were willing to indicate that they had undertaken unlawful and/or high risk behaviour. This suggests that the social desirability impacts may have been lessened due to the computer-based self-completion mode of delivery.

For example, in response to a question about whether a sub-sample of respondents had worked while living in a host country, the majority indicated that they had worked illegally (60%). Other responses included ‘yes, worked legally’ (19%) and ‘no, did not work’ (22%). The question had a low non-response rate of 2.1% response, with seven respondents opting to not respond to the question.

Q16. Did you work while you lived in [host country]?

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<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, worked legally</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, worked illegally</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, did not work</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 320. Weighted.
Filter: Previous home country (12 mths+) different to country of birth.
Note: The percentage of relevant respondents who did not answer this question was 2.1% (n=7).

While it is not possible to estimate results that could have resulted from other survey methodologies, it is possible to conclude that in answering this question, the majority of respondents were willing to indicate that they themselves had undertaken an illegal activity.

Another indicator that the methodology was successful related to a sensitive question about being smuggled across other countries’ borders. The full sample was asked whether, during their journey to Australia, they had been smuggled across other countries’ borders. The results again indicate a willingness on the part of respondents to indicate that they had undertaken an unlawful practice in their attempt to seek asylum. When examined by citizenship, the results show that only a very small proportion of Sri Lankans (4%) indicated that they had been smuggled across other countries’ borders during their journey. This accords with other survey results, and other information, on their tendency to have travelled directly from Sri Lanka without transiting other countries.

Q39 Which of the following statements generally applied to your experiences on your journey?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was smuggled across other countries’ borders</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[truncated list – see Appendix B for full response options]

n = 964. Weighted.
Note: Respondents were able to provide more than one answer to this question.
One perhaps useful example relates to a question asked of a sub-sample, on the main reasons the respondent ended up travelling to Australia. While this question essentially failed because the highest response (40%) was recorded against the response option ‘none of these’, it does demonstrate that respondents did take a certain level of care and consideration in responding to the question. Ideally, before the survey is repeated, further work would be undertaken to critically examine the experiences of IMAs to better understand the dynamics that this question was not able to fully capture.

Q31 What were the main reasons you ended up travelling to Australia from [country x]?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia was accepting refugees</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia does not return refugees</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because my family would be able to follow me to Australia</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[truncated list – see Appendix B for full response options]

n = 528. Weighted.

Note: Only respondents who did not answer “Australia” as an option at Q29 were asked this question. The percentage of relevant respondents who did not answer this question was 4.7% (n=26). Respondents were able to provide more than one answer.

An examination of specific survey results against other data sources indicated that the results accord with other data. For example, demographic data derived from the sample frame on citizenship, age and sex, generally match data from the demographic questions in the survey. Further examples include responses to questions on travel routes, which accord with other information sources, including anecdotal information.

Information sought, for example, from respondents on who they travelled to Australia with is consistent with information collected by government upon arrival. As can be seen from the table below, there is significant variation by citizenship. That the survey results accord with data collected separately indicates that it is likely that respondents provided accurate responses.

Q6 Who did you travel to Australia with?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Afghan %</th>
<th>Iranian %</th>
<th>Pakistani %</th>
<th>Sri Lankan %</th>
<th>Other %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend(s) only</td>
<td>5*</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>5*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family only</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10*</td>
<td>19*</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 999. Weighted.

Note: Estimates based on less than 20 unweighted responses have been asterisked and should be treated with caution.

In addition, routine measures were undertaken during or post the fieldwork stage to assist in ensuring aspects of data quality. As a means of quality control, for example, the fieldwork phase of the IMA survey incorporated a data verification exercise. This involved a fieldwork supervisor re-contacting 15% of survey participants to verify their name and contact details as well as responses to three randomly selected questions from the survey.

Overall, it would appear that the survey methodology was at least partially successful in eliciting frank responses from respondents, including on a range of sensitive issues.
5. CONCLUSIONS

As one of the first commissioned research projects undertaken as part of the Research Program, and the first of its kind as a quantitative survey of first-hand experience of IMAs to Australia, the IMA survey provides an empirical evidence base to assist in the development of improved understanding of decision making of irregular maritime arrivals to Australia. It is an important addition to the small but growing evidence base on migrant decision making. The occasional paper Placing recent Sri Lankan maritime arrivals in a broader migration context draws, in part, on surveys conducted in Sri Lanka of potential irregular migrants, and their views of Australia as a destination country. Further quantitative and qualitative research in source and transit countries is also underway as part of the Research Program.

Overall, the survey methodology has provided unique insights into aspects of irregular migrants’ decision making, including the information sources accessed and travel practices employed to get to Australia. The candid nature of the results, and in particular the willingness of respondents to have acknowledged high risk and unlawful behaviour, indicates that the survey methodology was on the whole reasonably successful, notwithstanding some specific questions that were not able to fully capture some of the dynamics involved in decision making. The limitations of seeking to capture complex information via a quantitative survey are also clear, particularly in relation to detailed questions on the extent to which respondents relied on various forms of information when making decisions. There would be merit in undertaking supplementary qualitative research on the more complex aspects of decision making that the survey instrument was unable to fully explore.

The IMA survey results, as analysed in a separate occasional paper, offer insights into a range of areas in which further analysis and research activity would be valuable for creating a solid base of measurement and analysis to inform policy and program considerations. For example, in looking at the differences between how citizenship groups answer questions, future analysis of the final survey results can seek to identify the gaps in our current understanding of the reasons for these differences. This may in turn inform research activities that are tailored to specific citizenship groups. Additional surveys conducted on an annual basis would assist in improved analysis of changes in dynamics over time.
References


IMA Survey Methodology – additional information

Technical pilot

After cognitive testing and revision of the survey instrument, the electronic version of the questionnaire was reviewed prior to the commencement of the technical pilot phase. At this stage, there were very few issues with the questionnaire itself. For example:

- For the question “When you were in X, which countries did you consider travelling to?”, an option for e.g. “I did not consider any particular countries” was not included. Following feedback from assistants who indicated a small proportion of respondents signaled that this may be the case for some IMAs, it was recommended this option be included at the end of the prompted list of countries.

- For the question “Which countries did you travel through on your journey to Australia? Please do not include countries where you stopped for less than 24 hours” the most popular transit countries anticipated were included at the top of the list of world countries for ease of responding, however Thailand – a popular transit country – remained towards the bottom of the list in appropriate alphabetical order. It was recommended it be moved towards the top of the list.

- For the question “Which of the following statements generally apply to your experiences in Australia?” did not match other multiple response questions in the survey by including an exclusive “None of these” option; it was recommended one was put in place.

For the pilot phase, the tablets were connected to the internet via a mobile Wi-Fi modem on the Telstra Next G network. For the most part these provided reliable and continuous internet connectivity, however, there were several incidents where either the device was unable to connect to the network in the first place or dropped out throughout the course of the survey. This was predominantly due to the quality of the mobile network depending on the area of Sydney where the survey was taking place, however a small number of surveys were affected by the malfunctioning of the mobile Wi-Fi devices themselves. This latter issue was fully resolved in advance of the main phase of the project.

Where a loss of connectivity occurred, assistants handed respondents a paper version of the survey (prepared and on hand for this eventuality), which they self-completed with some assistance when it came to question routing and skipping. The completed paper surveys were retained and the data was entered at a later stage once a reliable internet connection was established.

Sampling scheme

The scope of the survey was all adult IMAs who had been issued a protection visa between 6 July 2011 and 31 December 2012 (inclusive), and were based in Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. This totalled 4,725 IMAs. Figure 1 shows the sampling scheme used to reach the final sample of 1,008 interviewed IMAs.
Figure 1: IMA survey sampling scheme

4,725 in initial sample
(all adult IMAs issued a protection visa between 6 July 2011 & 31 December 2012 and based in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane)

3,492 in metro areas only and with a valid phone number

3,177 dialled

2,167 without a language barrier

2,173 that were reachable

6 with language barrier

315 not dialled (out of quota*)

1,004 unreachable

407 refused

1760 agreed to an interview

752 out of quota*

1,233 in non-metro areas/ without a valid telephone number

* 'Out of quota' incorporates persons who had been reached and confirmed for an interview, but were subsequently not needed as the requisite number of interviews for their citizenship had been attained; or indeed failed to appear at/rearranged/refused an interview at the previously booked appointment time, leading to their no longer being needed.

Weighting and estimation

The survey responses were re-weighted to reflect the characteristics of the underlying population. The re-weighting was based on citizenship, age and sex. The weighting approach adopted assumed that respondents respond in the same way as non-respondents for the characteristics of interest. The weighting method above assumes that the responding persons represent the non-responding persons.

As with any survey, the data collected from a sample is used to make estimates of the larger population. The desired sample structure of the survey embodied a statistically accurate
representation of the wider IMA population. As this real-world population is proportionally skewed towards males, the sample itself has been designed to capture this proportional bias, as it seeks to mirror the wider IMA population on all its demographic characteristics in microcosm, in order to paint the most accurate picture possible. In the instance of any of the key sampling quotas placed on the fieldwork failing to be met, the data was weighted to match the demographic make-up of the wider IMA population.

The result of the survey was a clean, usable, high-quality data set, broadly representative of the IMA population, which was sufficiently detailed to provide evidence that directly contributes to addressing knowledge gaps on the drivers and determinants of irregular migration.

Measures of error and accuracy

Two types of error can occur in sample surveys: sampling error and non-sampling error. Sampling error arises because in a sample survey not all of the population are surveyed. Hence a measured sample statistic is not usually identical with the true population behaviour. Non-sampling errors can result from imperfections in reporting by respondents, errors made in recording and coding of responses, and errors made in processing the data. They cause bias in statistical results and can occur at any stage of a survey and can also occur with censuses (i.e. when every member of the target population is included). Sampling error can be estimated mathematically whereas estimating non-sampling error can be difficult. It is important to be aware of these errors, in particular non-sampling error, so they can be either minimised or eliminated from the survey.

Non-sampling error

A total of 1,008 respondents participated in the survey. The survey received a response rate of 47% (calculated by dividing the number of conducted interviews by the number of the sample able to be reached). This response rate excludes those that were unreachable based on the contact details drawn from administrative records. A total of 407 people declined to participate and an additional 752 were out of quota so were no longer required.

No quantifiable estimates are available on the effect of non-sampling errors. However, every effort was made to reduce the non-sampling errors to a minimum by careful survey design and efficient operating procedures. In particular, the online survey design minimised the possibility of errors made in recording and coding of responses, as the respondents themselves entered the data when responding to the survey.

Sampling error

One measure of the sampling error of an estimate is the standard error. There are about 19 chances in 20 that a sample estimate will be within two standard errors of the true population value. This is known as the 95% Confidence Interval. For instance, we are 95% confident that the estimate of the population that was personally involved in the final decision to leave their country of origin is between 79.5% and 84.3% (an estimate of 81.9% and a confidence interval of ±2.4% based on a standard error of 1.22%).

The following table illustrates the standard errors from the sample design associated with estimates from 10 questions in the employee survey. Generally, the higher the sample size for a question, the lower the standard error. For example, questions following a 'filter' question are more likely to have a higher standard error because the population size responding to that question is lower than for 'non-filtered' questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Estimate result (%)</th>
<th>Sample size (n)</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied for a visa to another country prior to departing origin country</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>1003</td>
<td>+/- 1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between one and five family members in Australia prior to leaving home/host country</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>+/- 2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious discrimination experienced in home/host country prior to leaving</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>+/- 3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imminent threat of deportation from host triggered departure</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>+/- 2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally involved in the final decision to leave home/host country</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>+/- 2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who helped with travel (e.g. people smugglers) involved in the final decision to leave home/host country</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>989</td>
<td>+/- 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Australia was accepting refugees’ was the main reason ended up travelling to Australia</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>+/- 4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a visa to validly enter transit country during the journey to Australia</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>+/- 3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a false passport made respondent feel very unsafe</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>+/- 5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the journey to Australia was much more difficult than expected</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>991</td>
<td>+/- 2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where the number of unweighted responses is fewer than 20, results have been marked with an asterix. These figures should be treated with caution.

**Use of scales**

Scales were included in questions that required a respondent to measure the strength or level of a theoretical construct. The use of scales was kept to a minimum following cognitive testing, which showed that respondents had difficulty interpreting scales. Many questions that had previously involved a Likert 5-point scale were converted into binary response options in response to cognitive testing results.

The scales used in the survey were generally balanced - that is, they allowed the respondents to express one of the two extreme points of view (e.g. more difficult and easier). These scales were also designed with a midpoint that allowed respondents to enter a ‘neutral’ response.

When interpreting scales it is important to realise that it is possible there is not an ordinal relationship between points in a scale. That is, the strength of opinion to shift a respondent from ‘neutral’ to ‘more difficult’ may be much smaller than the strength required to shift a respondent to ‘much more difficult’ rather than ‘more difficult’. Nevertheless, literature generally assumes that such scales are ordinal.

**Coding of open-ended responses**

The employee survey questionnaire provided specified response options for each question. It also included open-ended response options for some questions, which enabled respondents to provide a text response to a question. Open-ended options were commonly provided, for example, as part of a specified response question in the form of ‘other (please specify)’.
Some open-ended responses have been coded to assist analysis. Coding involved, for example, removing irrelevant and incidental comments from statistical outputs as well as counting relevant comments against the appropriate response option. The coding framework was developed by the IMA survey team in the department (comprising three people) and was the subject of individual consideration followed by team review; the framework was then provided to McNair for coding and inclusion in the dataset.