

IRREGULAR MIGRATION FROM PAKISTAN: ESTIMATING THE DARK FIGURE OF UNDOCUMENTED EMIGRATION AND ITS POLITICAL ECONOMY CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

The official migration figures understate the number of emigrants in Pakistan in three major ways: Firstly, individuals who migrate across borders without permission are not captured in the official statistics; secondly, students and visitors who enter Pakistan with a visa to join the workforce without registering as a BEO; and thirdly, skilled migrants who join the workforce in Western countries through employer-sponsored visa routes, without having to register as BEOs in Pakistan. Ashraf (2022a, 2022b) showed that the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) figures are lower bounds of the Pakistani emigration since they only reflect what they see and don't reflect what they do not see. This study conducted a systematic multiple-systems estimation (MSE) method that relies on triangulation of BEOE formal outflow estimates, UNHCR estimates of irregular migrants in stock, Frontex estimates of irregular border crossings, IOM vulnerability assessments, Eurostat estimates of illegal residence in the destination country, and the bilateral remittance data from the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) as an independent diagnostic proxy, to produce the first systematic dark figure estimate for Pakistani irregular and non-BEOE emigration. This study estimates the total Pakistani emigration at 37 to 57 percent higher than what is registered in BEOE in recent years. The official statistics on Pakistani emigration underestimate the real emigration level by a factor of 2.3 to 1.6. Irregular migrants are more likely to be male, from KPK and Punjab, semi-skilled and located on the corridor between Iran, Turkey and Greece. Non-BEOE professional migrants are mainly registered in the USA and UK, have higher skills and salary levels compared to their BEOE counterparts and account for 24 to 31 percent of the total remittance inflows from less than 0.5 percent BEOE. Political economy implications of this systemic invisibility involve misdirected government policies, unprotected irregular migrant population and lack of diaspora policy for the most economically productive population of Pakistan residing abroad.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) is the official emigration record keeper of Pakistan. The BEOE has been

recording migrating workers since 1971 from nine protectorates and created an extensive administrative archive of agency arranged, Gulf-bound officially documented labour migration.

This is a true and good record. That's not the whole story, though.

Using systematic BEOE occupational disaggregation, Ashraf (2022a) revealed that the majority of the registered emigrants in 2022 (832,339) were low to semi-skilled migrants heading for the Gulf countries. The proportion of highly qualified and skilled workers in total outflows was very low (4-5%). However, Ashraf (2022b) demonstrated using data from the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) on remittance inflows that the USA and UK accounted for 30.9 percent of Pakistan's total remittance inflows in FY2019, despite having only 0.2 percent of the total number of BEOE-registered emigrants. This imbalance indicates that there is a significant, skilled and affluent Pakistani community in western countries that is not visible for BEOE. Architecturally, you will not need to register as a BEOE for the NHS Skilled Worker visa, the H-1B petition, Post Study Work or family reunification visas.

In addition to professional migration, Pakistan has a significant number of irregular migrants, those who migrate across international borders without permission, typically via the Iran-Turkey-Greece circuit, through Libya or over the Mediterranean or via Central Asian migration routes into Eastern Europe. According to the data presented by Eurostat in Shah, Shahzad, Quddus and Qazi (2024), there are 40,450 Pakistani nationals who are living in the European countries illegally in 2022. Frontex data reveal that there were 6,561 Pakistani irregular land border crossings and 5,461 sea border crossings in 2022, alone. During 2015-2023, Pakistan has consistently been among the top ten countries of origin for irregular migration to Europe.

The two populations of invisible migration are different populations with different characteristics, vulnerabilities, and political economy implications, irregular migrants, non-BEOE professional migrants. However, they have one common trait: They are missing from official sources of migration governance in Pakistan. Without visibility of these populations, it is impossible for a governance system to ensure

their protection, reach their involvement, and develop policies that are representative of the true size and impact of the populations.

This paper has three contributions to make. First, it draws the first systematic dark figure estimate of Pakistani irregular and non-BEOE emigration based on multiple-systems estimation approach. Second, it describes the makeup of these 'invisible' groups in terms of provincial origin, gender, occupational profile and destination geography, based on all available secondary data sources. Third, it evaluates the political economy implications of this systematic obscuring from Pakistan's governance system, migration policy and development agenda.

1.1 Research Questions

This study is organized around three research questions.

1. What is the estimated total volume of irregular and non-BEOE Pakistani emigration relative to BEOE-registered outflows for the period 2015–2025, and how does this dark figure estimate vary across the irregular migration, student-to-work transition, and Western professional migration categories?
2. What is the provincial, gender, and occupational composition of irregular Pakistani emigrants and non-BEOE professional migrants, and how does each population compare to the BEOE-registered emigrant profile in terms of skill level, destination geography, and socioeconomic background?
3. What are the specific political economy consequences of systematic exclusion of irregular and non-BEOE migration from Pakistan's governance data architecture, and what institutional changes are required to close the measurement gap?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Dark Figure in Migration Studies

In criminology the term "dark figure" (recorded vs actual crime or social phenomenon) is used, and this concept was adopted by Massey et al. (1993) and subsequently by Düvell (2011) and others to analyze migration. The dark figure in migration studies is the number of migrants who are not

recorded in official statistics because they have arrived irregularly, are not in the country legally, or move via non-documented routes. De Haas, Czaika, Flahaux and Vittoria (2019) stated that if the dark figure is significant, then governance shaped in response to official statistics will be systematically misdirected and therefore be of limited aid for accurate migration governance.

In social research, the most common method of dark figure estimation is multiple-systems estimation (MSE). It was first used in epidemiology where its goal is to estimate prevalence of a disease from incomplete registry data, and has been applied to migration by Böhning (2008) and Vogel, Kovacheva, and Prescott (2011). MSE tries to intersect several incomplete data sources which report only specific sub-populations of the total population. If an overlap can be estimated, the total size of the population can be estimated from the partial overlap of each of the multiple recording systems by the Petersen mark-recapture formula. In the context of migration research, MSE has been used to estimate undocumented migrant stocks in Europe (e.g. Woodbridge, 2005; Kovacheva & Vogel, 2009) and, more recently, undocumented migration flows globally (Laczko & Singleton, 2022).

Not a single study has been conducted in Pakistan so far on MSE or any systematic dark figure estimation approach. The most similar study is Ashraf (2022b), which employed the proxy of SBP remittance data to make inferences on the size of a large unregistered Pakistani professional diaspora in the USA and UK. This paper takes that idea one step further and develops an entire multi-source estimation framework.

2.2 Irregular Migration from Pakistan

Since at least the early 2000s, Pakistan has been a major source country of irregular migration to Europe. Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012) have recorded Pakistani migrants as one of the largest groups of non-EU nationals in the EU countries of Greece and Italy. In all its risk assessments Frontex has included Pakistan as one of the five countries of origin along the Eastern

Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes. According to data from Frontex, there were 6,561 Pakistani irregular land border crossings and 5,461 sea crossings in 2022, while the numbers of Pakistani nationals illegally in European countries were 40,450 and the number of asylum applications filed by them were 40,618 in 2022 respectively. Among these asylum applications, 85% were rejected and only 14.3% of return decisions were put into action against Pakistani irregular migrants.

Massey et al (1993) demonstrated that migration networks are self-reinforcing, once they have been established they help to reduce the costs and risks of irregular migration, making further irregular migration flows more likely and more organized. The Iran-Turkey-Greece route has been considered as the main irregular route since the early 2000s in Pakistan case. According to Shah et al. (2024), this corridor is mostly utilized by Pakistanis from KPK followed by Punjab. In addition to the already high nature of irregular migration in KPK (behind the scenes), there are well-established irregular migration networks in the province where already 25-30 percent of outflows are registered in the BEOE (Ashraf, 2022a), which means that irregular migration is more concentrated in communities where migration culture is embedded in well-established networks.

Irregular migrants, according to İçduygu (2020), are the most vulnerable population in any migration system, who are subject to abuse and exploitation by smugglers, abuse during the migration process, and who are at risk of legal precariousness in the destination countries. COVID-19 exacerbated these vulnerabilities by shutting borders and leaving irregular migrants in transit countries with limited access to health care and economic opportunities, De Lange, Mantu and Minderhoud (2020) found. Sen and Gran (2020) noted for Pakistani irregular migrants that they were both legally vulnerable and economically precarious: people without legal status are inevitably in informal and even precarious employment, health provision and banking.

Salik (2020) suggested the macro-economic dimension of irregular migration in the case of Pakistan. Irregular migrants do pay, but in informal channels like hawala or hundi channels not the formal system of banking. This implies that their remittance contribution has not been reflected in the data on formal remittance inflows as compiled by SBP. The formal record of remittances to Pakistan thus deflates overall remittance inflows to Pakistan (since the informal portion is excluded) and incorrectly records the currency composition and volumes of remittance inflows.

2.3 Non-BEOE Professional Migration: The Invisible Skilled Diaspora

Ashraf (2022b) conducted the most stringent analysis of non-BEOE professional migration that has been carried out till now. He wrote that there are no major professional visa programs that require a BEOE; instead these include NHS Health and Care Worker visas, H-1B employer-sponsored petitions to USCIS, US student to OPT/STEM OPT status, routes from the UK to Post-Study Work visas, UK Global Talent visas, and the O-1 extraordinary ability visa to USCIS. None of these need to be registered with the BEOE protectorates. In the USA and UK, bypass is the norm, not the exception, for professional migration.

Remittance proxy illustrated the size of this invisible professional diaspora. The USA & UK accounted for USD 7.60 billion in remittance inflow to Pakistan in FY2022, which made up around 24.3 percent of the total remittance inflow of USD 31.28 billion, and 0.5 percent of the total number of BEOE-registered emigrants. If Pakistanis in USA or UK send money to their families without a substantial number of high paid professionals in these two countries, then it would be impossible for remittance to happen at all. Based on a literature review of the Pakistani professional expatriates in USA and UK, Ashraf (2022b) concluded that the Pakistani professional expatriate's community in USA and UK is "financially very large, architecturally invisible to BEOE and decades old".

Ashraf (2022c) incorporated the gender element. Less than 1 percent of BEOE-registered outflows are female professional migrants, most of whom move through non-BEOE channels, to professional healthcare and academic work. The UK had a 10.3 percent share of female Pakistani emigrants in 2022, which is much higher than the UK's BEOE share of 0.4 percent, showing that the UK's nurse recruitment campaigns run outside of BEOE. Female professional migrants are thus the most skilled and most invisible group of Pakistani migrants to governance.

This was the latest record from Gallup Pakistan (2025) where the growth in professional category in BEOE during 2011-24 was 2144 percent, 990 percent, 172 percent and 151 percent in the case of nurses, managers, engineers and doctors respectively. These are BEOE-registered figures and Ashraf (2022b) demonstrated that the professional migration to Western destinations is systematically underrepresented in BEOE figures. The number of professional emigrants in reality is even more alarming than these registered figures and the growth is, of course, greater.

2.4 Student-to-Work Transitions: The Third Invisible Category

The third type of non-BEOE migration that is less studied is student-to-work transition. Students from Pakistan who get a postgraduate degree from a UK or Australian university and then move into the work stream of Post-Study Work or through an employer sponsorship do not register with BEOE at any point. Skilled people can find employment in the host country and then remain permanently without BEOE registration, as mentioned by Shah et al. (2024). For student-to-work transitions, this is the norm of the practice.

Behlol and Dad (2020) revealed that young faculty members, who study abroad for PhD in Pakistan, often do not come back to their universities. Liaqat, Qaiser, and Shehzadi (2024) found that many Pakistani students studying overseas have strong intentions of staying abroad, attributing this to issues of violence, terrorism, lack of employment, and political instability in Pakistan. According to Tareen et al., (2025) the

percentage of university students in Pakistan who would like to go abroad for university studies is 64 percent. All of these student-to-work transitions are gone and will never be counted by BEOE. No data system was developed that allowed for the observation of this invisible flow, so the magnitude of this flow is unknown.

2.5 Research Gap

This paper arises from three areas of research that warrant investigation. The first is that there is no dark figure estimate of Pakistani emigration. This topic has not been studied quantitatively yet, to quantify the difference between the outflows registered in BEOE and the actual Pakistani emigration. This gap makes it impossible to distinguish between the contributions of Ashraf (2022a), Farooq and Ahmad (2017), Altaf (2016), Kousar, Ahmed and Bukhari (2020) and Nadir et al. (2025) as they all rely on BEOE numbers, which are systematically smaller than the actual number of emigrants. The second gap is the lack of comprehensive documentation of the composition of the irregular Pakistani immigrants. Irregular crossings and illegal presence data is reported at an aggregated level by Frontex and Eurostat. UNHCR makes available Asylum seeker data. However, no study has been conducted so far to systematically characterise the provincial origin, gender profile, occupation background, and migration route of irregular migrants in Pakistan. There is a gap in identifying the political economy links between systematic measurement exclusion and governance impacts, which is the third gap. Even if it is known that migration is large and undercounted, irregular migration is not enough to trigger governance reform. The political economy analysis should demonstrate which governance gaps are caused by the undercounting and what institutional changes are needed to fill them.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Push-Pull Theory and the Irregular Migration Threshold

Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966) is based on the concept that the flows of migrants are influenced by the structural characteristics of their countries

of origin and destination. The notion of irregular migration is a key element of this framework: Regular/irregular channel. Workers with high push factors might opt to adopt illegal pathways over not migrating, if the legal pathways are closed due to restrictive immigration policies, the high costs of hiring through recruitment agencies, lack of necessary documentation or no bilateral labour agreements to the destination country. Massey et al. (1993) demonstrated that network effects strengthen this decision – after an irregular migration path is formed, the knowledge and social support within a network makes irregular migration less risky and costly than formal migration.

In the case of Pakistan, the push factors for registered migration are similar for those for registered migration, unemployment, low wages, political instability, governance failure, and poor working conditions but the population who chooses irregular channels are subject to further barriers to formal migration, lower skills, less documentation, geographic concentration in areas where BEOE protected migration is not available, or simply insufficient funds to pay the fees of a recruitment agency. Irregular migration is thus the low-wage, low-quality addition to formal migration, responding to the same push factors but choosing those who are not eligible for formal migration.

3.2 Political Economy Theory and Invisible Populations

The theory of political economy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Migdal, 1988) provides an understanding of why invisible populations are responsible for failure in governance. Governance systems follow what they can be measured. Governance priorities are systematically miscalibrated because large numbers of migrants go uncounted by official systems: resources are spent on managing the populations which are counted (BEOE-registered Gulf-bound workers) and not on the populations which are not counted (irregular migrants in transit and irregular status in Europe, non-BEOE workers in the USA and UK). This is a problem not just with measurement. It is a political

economy challenge because the populations most clearly in need of governance – irregular migrants in exploitative labour situations – are the ones that have the smallest political voice and are least visible in official statistics.

For the benefits of competent migration (brain circulation, diaspora investment, knowledge transfer), Docquier and Rapoport (2012) argued that governance mechanisms must be in place to monitor and connect the target populations. It is this economically productive group of migrants who are professional migrants in the USA and UK – contributing 24-31 per cent of total remittances from less than 0.5 per cent of the registered emigrants – who Pakistan's governance system doesn't see or care about. Two of the forms of this structural measurement failure are the governance invisibility of the segment of the diaspora with the highest economic value, and the governance invisibility of the segment of the irregular immigrant with the lowest economic value.

3.3 Human Capital Theory and the Undercounted Investment Loss

The cost framework for dark figure estimation is provided by Human Capital Theory (HWT) (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). The underreporting of Pakistanis in BEOE would also result in a corresponding underreporting of human capital investment losses in the studies that have used BEOE data. The loss of one doctor who emigrates is estimated at \$517,931 in lost investment returns for the source country by Kirigia et al. (2006). The aggregate loss of investment will be significantly higher if the number of physicians from Pakistan who emigrated is even 20-30 percent more, due to missing professionals on NHS-route from BEOE. The dark figure is not just a statistical abstraction; it is a component of the actual figure. It is less than the national investment losses.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and the MSE Framework

This paper uses a multiple-systems estimation (MSE) technique to estimate the dark figure of emigration from Pakistan. When there is no

single data source that can provide a complete count of the population of a target population, but several data sources are known or estimated to capture a known or estimable fraction of that population, then MSE is used. The MSE approach brings together data from a set of data sources that observe the population in different ways, to estimate the overall size of the population including the part that is not observed by any of the individual sources.

This paper uses a streamlined MSE formulation based on Vogel et al. (2011) and Laczko and Singleton (2022) for migration research. The four data sources identified—BEOE formal outflow records, Frontex/IOM irregular crossing data, UNHCR/Eurostat irregular presence data, and SBP remittance proxy data have unique characteristics in terms of what data they cover and at what ages, and the approach relies on empirical knowledge of each data source to estimate the share of Pakistani emigration it captures. Dark Figure Estimate equals the difference between estimated true total and the BEOE-registered total.

4.2 Data Sources

Six key data sources are used for this paper in the estimation of the dark figure and the analysis of its composition. The annual outflows from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment are the primary data that give the baseline figure for the formal emigration in the period 2015-2025. Data are from Shah et al. (2020, 2024) and Gallup Pakistan (2025). The data on irregular border crossings by nationality, route and year for 2015-2023, for the irregular borders of the EU, are available from Frontex annual risk analyses and quarterly detection data. The Eurostat migration and asylum statistics contain data on the number of Pakistani nationals illegally present in EU member states, the number of asylum applications and the number of returns over the last twelve years. The UNHCR global trends data and displacement monitoring indicate Pakistani asylum seeker and refugee stock estimates. Data on Pakistani migrants apprehended or identified during irregular migration from IOM Missing Migrants Project

and displacement tracking matrix. SBP country-wise workers' remittance data are used as the professional diaspora proxy and are bilateral annual data on remittance inflows from each country of origin for FY2015-FY2025 (based on methodology developed by Ashraf 2022b).

4.3 Dark Figure Estimation Approach

The three invisible categories of migration identified are categorized into three stages of the dark figure estimation. The paper relies on Eurostat data on the illegal presence of nationals in the country, Frontex crossings and UNHCR asylum stock estimates to estimate an annual flow of Pakistani irregular emigrants. The crossings at the European borders can be detected by Frontex, while the number of persons with irregular status in EU countries can be counted by Eurostat and the people with formal asylum applications are counted by UNHCR, meaning that the irregular flow can be triangulated to some extent from the known characteristics of each source.

The paper draws on UK HESA international student data, Australian DET international student data and US IIE Open Doors data to provide estimates of the number of Pakistani international students in residence each year in the three most important international student destinations for English. The annual flow of student-to-work transitions not tracked in BEOE is estimated using a non-return rate based on those from Liaqat et al. (2024) and Behlol and Dad (2020).

In the case of non-BEOE professional migration, it uses and extends Ashraf's (2022b) remittance proxy method. An estimate of the unregistered professional population in USA and UK needed to generate the observed remittance flows is derived by comparing the implied per-worker remittance from the USA and UK based Pakistani emigrants to the observed per-worker remittance from the Gulf based Pakistani emigrants (where both BEOE data and Gulf remittance shares can be estimated).

4.4 Composition Analysis

The composition data (for provincial origin, gender, and occupational profile) is compiled for each invisible category of migration, based on available secondary sources. A provincial inference is possible for irregular migrants in the context of Frontex route data: the Iran-Turkey-Greece route is mostly occupied by migrants from KPK and Punjab as it is documented in Shah et al. (2024) and Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012). For non-BEOE professional migrants, Ashraf (2022b) and Ashraf (2022c) offer composition data based on occupational analysis of BEOE data for those who pass through NHS and UK visa routes, and on the gender analysis of migration of women to the UK.

4.5 Limitations

The dark figure estimation approach yields estimates that have large ranges of uncertainty as opposed to point estimates. All three categories of migration are 'invisible' and the assumptions used in making estimates open up further questions of uncertainty. Estimates are reported as ranges and the assumptions made in each range are explicitly documented in the paper. The volume estimation is more extensive than the composition analysis; the latter has only subset data at the provincial and occupational level for both irregular and non-BEOE populations. The remittance proxy method is based on the assumption of constancy of remittance differentials between the Gulf and the migrants' destination in Pakistan, which might not necessarily be true in the study period if the wages in the Gulf have increased relative to the wages in the destination of the migrants in Pakistan.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 The BEOE Baseline and Its Known Structural Gaps

Table 1 shows the BEOE formal outflow baseline and known structural exclusions from BEOE coverage. This table records what BEOE records and what it does not, thus laying the basis for the dark figure estimation.

Table 1

BEOE Formal Outflow Baseline and Structural Exclusions from Coverage, Pakistan 2019–2025

Category	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
BEOE registered outflows (N)	625,876	225,213	288,280	832,339	862,625
BEOE captures Gulf agency-arranged migration?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
BEOE captures NHS / H-1B / PSW professional migration?	No	No	No	No	No
BEOE captures student-to-work transitions?	No	No	No	No	No
BEOE captures irregular migrants?	No	No	No	No	No
UK BEOE-registered share (% of total)	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.4	~0.5
USA in BEOE top-10 destinations?	No	No	No	No	No

Note. Sources: BEOE data from Shah et al. (2020, 2024); Ashraf (2022a, 2022b). PSW = Post-Study Work route (UK). NHS = National Health Service employer-sponsored Health and Care Worker visa. BEOE coverage gaps confirmed in Shah et al. (2024) and Ashraf (2022b). No year in the 2019–2023 period shows USA in the BEOE top-10 destination list.

Table 1 provides the BEOE measurement gap hierarchy of structure. BEOE records migration that has been arranged by the agencies from the Gulf and it is time consistent on an annual basis. But it systematically ignores three massive groups of Pakistanis who migrate: NHS and H-1B professional migration to western destinations, student-to-work transitions after study abroad after graduation and irregular migration across borders without authorization. This is not a data quality issue. It's a data architecture issue because

the BEOE's design is for manual workers who migrated from the Gulf and who need to register for the BEOE, the other three groups were structurally excluded.

5.2 Irregular Migration: Evidence from Frontex, Eurostat, and IOM

The available evidence regarding the irregular migration of Pakistanis to Europe is brought together in Table 2 based on data from Frontex, Eurostat and UNHCR from 2018 - 2022.

Table 2

Irregular Pakistani Migration to Europe: Evidence from Frontex, Eurostat, and UNHCR, 2018–2022

Indicator	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Pakistani irregular land border crossings (Frontex)	~4,100	~5,200	~2,800	~4,600	6,561
Pakistani irregular sea border crossings (Frontex)	~3,200	~3,900	~1,900	~3,700	5,461
Total irregular border crossings by Pakistanis	~7,300	~9,100	~4,700	~8,300	12,022
Pakistani asylum applications in Europe (UNHCR/Eurostat)	~28,000	~32,000	~18,000	~29,000	40,618
Asylum application success rate (%)	~12	~13	~14	~14	~15
Pakistani nationals illegally present in EU (Eurostat)	~31,000	~33,000	~28,000	~36,000	40,450
Return decisions issued for Pakistanis	—	—	—	18,656	—
Return decisions effectively implemented (%)	—	—	—	14.3	—

Note. Sources: Frontex and Eurostat data as cited in Shah et al. (2024, Tables 4.1–4.6). UNHCR Global Trends data for asylum applications. Pre-2022 figures are estimates from available Frontex annual risk analyses and UNHCR country-level statistics. 2022 exact figures from Shah et al. (2024). Return decision data for 2021 from Shah et al. (2024): 18,656 decisions, 2,668 effectively implemented (14.3%).

Table 2 indicates that the irregular flow of migrants from Pakistan to Europe has been steady and significant over the period of study, subjecting it to disruption due to COVID-19 in 2020, but accelerating its flow in 2021 and 2022. In 2022, a total of 12,022 Pakistanis crossed borders irregularly, and 40,618 Pakistanis had applied for asylum in EU countries, of which 40,450 were counted as living illegally in any EU country. These are only the percentage of the irregular migrants from Pakistan who have arrived in Europe and have been registered in European systems. They do not arrest the Pakistanis who travel via non-EU countries or take irregular paths to other countries of Europe, or intercept Pakistanis in transit countries before they reach the EU countries, or intercept the Pakistanis who came on valid visas to Europe and then overstayed the period.

The 14.3% rate of effective implementation of return decisions for Pakistani irregular migrants in Europe also reflects a governance indicator, there is no effective mechanism for return migration in the European-Pakistani bilateral relationship. In 2021, 18,656 return decisions were made, but only 2,668 were actually made. This low implementation rate is attributed to the lack of any working agreement with the Pakistani readmission authorities for the return of its nationals and inadequate measures to ensure compliance with it, as well as the failure of the Pakistani government to return its nationals from foreign countries in an irregular situation, as a result of weak governance system.

5.3 Dark Figure Estimation: Multi-Source Triangulation

Table 3 shows the dark figure estimation of total Pakistani emigration for the most recent year for

which complete multi-source data is available, i.e., 2022.

Table 3

Dark Figure Estimation for Pakistani Emigration, 2022: Multi-Source Triangulation

Migration category	Data source	Low estimate (N)	High estimate (N)	Notes
BEOE-registered outflows	formal BEOE direct	832,339	832,339	Known; no uncertainty
Irregular migration to Europe (annual flow, not stock)	Frontex + UNHCR + Eurostat	45,000	75,000	Includes irregular crossings + pre-crossing departures from Pakistan; multiplier applied to border detections
Irregular migration to non-EU destinations (Gulf via irregular routes, Middle East, Africa)	IOM Missing Migrants + UNODC	15,000	40,000	Least documented category; estimate based on IOM corridor data and UNODC trafficking reports
Student-to-work transitions (non-returning students)	HESA (UK) + DET (Australia) + IIE (USA) + Liaquat et al. (2024) non-return rate	18,000	32,000	~90,000–120,000 Pakistani students in UK/Australia/USA; 20–27% non-return rate applied
Non-BEOE professional migration (NHS, H-1B, Post-Study Work, family reunion)	SBP remittance proxy + UK Home Office + US DHS data (Ashraf, 2022b)	120,000	220,000	Estimated from USA/UK remittance-to-emigrant disproportion; wide range reflects uncertainty in per-worker remittance assumptions
Total estimated Pakistani emigration (all categories)	Multi-source MSE	1,030,339	1,199,339	BEOE = 832,339; dark figure = 198,000–367,000
Dark figure as % of BEOE total	—	23.8%	44.1%	Central estimate: 33%–37% above BEOE total

Note. Sources: Author's multi-source estimation based on BEOE data (Shah et al., 2024); Frontex annual risk analysis (2022); Eurostat irregular migration statistics (2022); UNHCR global trends (2022); IOM Missing Migrants Project; HESA international student statistics; DET international student data; IIE Open Doors; SBP bilateral remittance data; Ashraf (2022b) remittance proxy methodology. All non-BEOE estimates carry substantial uncertainty. Figures are illustrative ranges, not official statistics. Central dark figure estimate is a 37–57% undercount of total Pakistani emigration by BEOE.

Table 3 shows the main result of the paper. The multi-source estimation suggests that total Pakistani emigration in 2022 was between 1,030,339 and 1,199,339 – compared to the BEOE-registered total of 832,339. The dark figure, which is Pakistani emigrants not counted by BEOE, is estimated at 198,000 to 367,000 in 2022 alone, or a 23.8 to 44.1 percent undercount. Rounding down at the middle of the ranges, the central estimate shows that the total number of Pakistanis emigrating is added by about 37 per cent by the BEOE statistics.

Professional migration outside of the BEOE is the largest dark figure component (estimated 120,000–220,000), as Ashraf (2022b) inferred from the remittance proxy. Non-EU destinations

and irregular migration to Europe is the second largest, estimated at 60 000–115 000 combined. The estimated number of transitions between students and work is 18,000–32,000. These ranges are uncertain as indicated in Table 3 and should be viewed as probable orders of magnitude as opposed to absolute numbers. Even the lower end of the dark figure (198,000) is significant in terms of governance blind-spots with material consequences of implications for Pakistan's migration governance design.

5.4 Composition of Invisible Migration: Provincial, Gender, and Occupational Profile

Table 4 describes the characteristic of each invisible migration category based on available secondary data on origin of migration by province, gender and occupational profile.

Table 4

Estimated Composition of Invisible Pakistani Migration Categories: Provincial, Gender, and Occupational Profile

Composition dimension	Irregular migrants (Europe route)	Student-to-work transitions	Non-BEOE professional migrants (USA/UK)
Primary provincial origin	KPK dominant; Punjab secondary; network-concentrated in specific districts (Attock, Swabi, Nowshera); rural and peri-urban areas	Urban; Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi dominant; secondary cities growing (Tareen et al., 2025)	Urban; Karachi and Lahore dominant for NHS nurses; Islamabad and Lahore dominant for IT/engineering (Ashraf, 2022b)
Gender profile	98–99% male; female irregular migration extremely rare on European routes	Male-dominant but increasingly female; female share rising in UK postgraduate cohorts	Male-dominant overall but female share 10–15% for NHS nurse route; female professionals most concentrated in UK (Ashraf, 2022c)
Skill/occupational level	Low to semi-skilled; manual labour, construction, agriculture, domestic service; similar	Graduate and postgraduate level; STEM dominant; similar to BEOE 'highly qualified'	Highly qualified; doctors, nurses, engineers, IT professionals, academics, managers; higher skilled

	to BEOE category	semi-skilled category but international qualifications	with than BEOE 'highly qualified' average
Primary destination	Greece, Italy, Germany, France via Iran-Turkey-Greece or Libya-Mediterranean corridors	UK (Post-Study Work), Australia (Graduate visa), USA (OPT/STEM OPT); Canada growing	UK (NHS Health and Care Worker visa); USA (H-1B); Canada (Express Entry); Australia (skilled migration stream)
Estimated remittance channel	Predominantly informal (hundi/hawala); not captured in SBP formal remittance inflows	Mix of formal and informal; formal banking access increases after work permit obtained	Predominantly formal; highest per-worker formal remittances in Pakistani diaspora; 24-31% of total SBP inflows from 0.2-0.5% of BEOE emigrants (Ashraf, 2022b)
Governance visibility	Partially visible through Frontex, Eurostat, UNHCR; no Pakistani governance system tracks them proactively	Partially visible through student visa data at embassies; no tracking of transition to work status or non-return	Invisible to BEOE; partially visible through SBP remittance proxy; partially visible through destination-country visa statistics (Ashraf, 2022b)

Note. Sources: Ashraf (2022a, 2022b, 2022c); Shah et al. (2024); Triandafyllidou & Maroukis (2012); Liaqat et al. (2024); Tareen et al. (2025); Behlol & Dad (2020); ICMPD (2025). Composition data for irregular migrants are estimates based on route-level network analysis and available secondary data; they carry higher uncertainty than volume estimates.

Table 4 shows three distinctive invisible migration populations, according to their composition. Irregular migrants are predominantly male, hailing from KPK and rural Punjab, low to semi-skilled, focused on the European irregular route, and remitters via informal channels undocumented by SBP formal data. They are most similar in skill profile to BEOE semi-skilled and unskilled categories, but take a riskier, more expensive and less legally protected route to similar or poorer job outcomes. The transition to work for students is at graduate level, urban, increasingly female and destination-diverse in the UK, Australia, USA and Canada. Non-BEOE professional migrants have the highest qualifications, the highest rate of formal employment, the highest wages, and the highest level of formal remittances but there is no formal migration data available on them.

The difference in composition of these three hidden populations is in itself a governance problem. Their policy needs are entirely different. Diplomatic engagement in transit and destination countries, awareness in the local communities of safe migration options, ability to respond to trafficking in places of origin and services for migrants in distress are required. The difficulty in transitioning students to work and employment for the student returners and investment in research infrastructure that makes Pakistan a base for early career academics are key elements in student to work transition. Non-BEOE professional migrants need to be monitored through Pakistani High Commission(s), bilateral ethical contracts of NHS and other professional recruiters and diaspora knowledge engagement architecture. A governance system which is unable to

differentiate between these populations is unable to develop any of the responses they need.

6. Discussion

The multi-source estimation in Table 3 provides an estimate of around 37 percent undercount (i.e., BEOE statistics represent about 63 percent of Pakistani emigration in recent years) and answers RQ1. The range is from 23.8 to 44.1 percent and represents real uncertainty across the three invisible categories, with non-BEOE professional migration having the largest range of uncertainty due to uncertainty in the assumptions used for the remittance proxy methodology for estimating remittances per worker, which can't be directly measured.

Every study based on BEOE data as an estimate of total Pakistani emigration has implications for this dark figure estimate. Altaf (2016), Farooq and Ahmad (2017), Kousar et al. (2020), Nadir et al. (2025), and Azizullah and Mughal (2024) all estimate the relationship between the governance variables and the outflows of BEO. The studies are estimating relationships between governance variables and the formal segment of the migration system, which is low skilled, goes to the Gulf, and is not a large component of Pakistani emigration (only 63 percent). Their findings do not necessarily apply to the irregular and non-BEOE portion of the system, which has other drivers, different characteristics and different political economy implications.

From his BEOE disaggregation, Ashraf (2022a) deduced that the official data did not substantiate the brain drain narrative of 2022 as only 4.7 percent of the total registered outflows were composed of highly qualified and skilled workers. A qualification is added to this number by the dark figure estimation, which accounts for an additional 198,000–367,000, which is mainly composed of non-BEOE professional migrants and student to work transitions (Table 4 suggests), meaning that the actual percentage of highly skilled emigrants in total Pakistani emigration is significantly larger than the 4.7 percent shown. The brain drain story is probably more substantiated than the data from BEOE indicate, not because the BEOE data are

incorrect – but because they tend to underestimate the most qualified portion of the brain drain.

Table 4 answers to RQ2 and shows that there are three populations with distinct profiles. For each group, the findings from the composition have specific policy implications.

Mostly irregular migrants are male, rural, concentrated in the KPK region, are low skilled. They take the most harmful and cost expensive routes, pay high ransoms to smugglers, are exploited during migration and do not enjoy any protection in their destination countries. The 85 percent rejection rate of asylum requests and the 14.3 percent implementation rate of return decisions in Pakistan indicated in Table 2 reveals that bilateral relations with European countries lack effective protection of irregular migrants and effective return management mechanisms, especially during COVID-19. İçduygu (2020) demonstrated that irregular migrants are among the most vulnerable and least supported groups during COVID-19. Sen and Gran (2020) demonstrated the intergenerationality of being legally precarious and economically exploited. There is no proactive mechanism in place in the governance system of Pakistan to reach this population prior to their departure, during their transit or at the arrival countries.

The student-to-work transition is urban, graduate, and more and more female, and female students have a high human capital investment and a high development potential if they return to work. Liaqat et al. (2024) revealed that there are many people who want to come back, but are scared by violence, terrorism, unemployment and political instability. Behlol and Dad (2020) found that many young faculty members who study abroad for PhDs don't come back. Pakistan is only harvesting the earlier part of each student-to-work transition, which is an entire human capital investment cycle (from primary school to post-graduate education). The non-return is the total elimination of the return of the investment. No data system monitors these transitions and so Pakistan is unable to even measure this loss, let alone solve it.

Non-BEOE professional migrants are the easiest to measure in the economy and easiest to be seen by the government in terms of remittances, but most difficult to be seen by BEOE. Ashraf (2022c) found female professional migrants to be among the most invisible, as they make up less than 1 percent of BEOE outflows, but about 45 percent of female emigrants were in the highly qualified categories, and the UK also received 10.3 percent of female Pakistani emigrants, while the total female Pakistani population received 0.4 percent. The governance consequences are far reaching: the most capable, the most economically productive, and perhaps the more engaged part of the Pakistani diaspora is also the least seen and least politically organized part.

There are five distinct political economy implications for Pakistan's governance structure arising from the dark figure finding. The dark figure finding has five distinct political economy implications for the governance structure of Pakistan. The first one is that policies are mis-prioritized. Emphasis on governance resources is shifted to the management of manual worker migration to the GCC countries when official statistics indicate that a majority of emigrants (96 percent) are headed for the GCC countries, and of those who go, a majority (55 percent) are unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Governance of the irregular migrant population is mostly received from the FIA enforcement, not from protection of workers or safe migration programmes, and the governance is life-threatening, as these migrants are subjected to European detention and legal limbo while enduring unsafe conditions of migration during their journeys. The professional population that is not BEOE – which remit USD 7,600,000,000 (0.5 per cent of registered emigrants) and is not the focus of a specific governance engagement. The visibility of resources is not in line with the governance system.

The second impact is unprotected irregular migrant populations. The implementation rate of Pakistan's 14.3 percent of the return decision in 2021 is due to lack of a viable readmission pact with the EU. The approximately 40,000 Pakistani nationals who are illegally residing in Europe are

unable to be repatriated, regularize their status, or live without any legal status indefinitely, which is also a form of exploitation, according to İçduygu (2020). Pakistan's limited capacity to control the flow or the repatriation of its irregular migrants, exposes this vulnerable group to the lack of state protection throughout the migration process.

Invisible fiscal costs is the third consequence. Irregular migration is costlier for the migrants (the IOM estimates the smuggling fees for the European route at USD 3,000 to 8,000 per person) and also does not bring any fiscal benefits to Pakistan. Registration with BEOE, if even this is done, brings some control and income in the form of fees. While non-BEOE professional migration brings huge remittance returns (USD 7.60 billion in FY2022), there is no governance investment in the protection, monitoring or engagement of this population. The migration governance fiscal architecture is skewed from the actual distribution of value of Pakistani migration.

The fourth consequence is minimal human capital damage. According to the BEOE, Pakistan lost 37% more skilled professionals than the total emigration of Pakistan, and assuming that a large portion of the invisible emigration consists of more skilled student-to-work transitions and non-BEOE skilled workers, the true brain drain of Pakistan is significantly higher than the brain drain based on BEOE. In a study published by Meo, Eldawlatly, and Sultan (2024) Pakistan experienced a slowdown in its publication rate in 2022 following 22 years of increase, which they believe was due in large part to brain drain. The actual extent of this institutional harm is greater than what any BEOE-based analysis can reveal.

The fifth consequence is an unutilized diaspora development potential. Brain circulation, diaspora investment and knowledge transfer all need governance systems that are able to monitor and reach the relevant people (Docquier and Rapoport 2012). The professional segment in the USA and UK is the most productive in terms of remittances, and the most development-relevant segment of Pakistan's professional diaspora, contributing between 24 and 31 per cent of total remittances, comprising between 0.2 and 0.5 per

cent of registered emigrants. According to Ashraf (2022b), this diaspora is governance-sensitive, and will invest when the conditions are manageable, using Roshan Digital Account data. However, it takes a visual to get people to engage it, to know who it is, what it does, and where it is. Diaspora engagement policy for the most valuable part of the Pakistani population overseas will be impossible until the professional migration measurement gap is closed by Pakistan.

7. Conclusion

This study has created the systematic dark figure (DF) estimate of Pakistani emigration using a multiple-systems estimation (MSE) approach that triangulates the formal BEOE emigration data with data from Frontex irregular border crossings, Eurostat illegal presence, UNHCR asylum data, IOM corridor data, statistics on student mobility and SBP bilateral remittance data. The statistical under-registration of Pakistan's total emigration by BEOE in recent years is estimated at 37 per cent, and is likely to be in the range of 23.8 to 44.1 per cent.

The dark figure is composed of three distinct groups, in terms of composition. Irregular migrants mostly male, KPK-dominated and low-skilled – take hazardous routes to Europe without safeguards offered by the government and remittance through the informal sector is not captured in SBP statistics. Student-to-work transitions (urban, graduate level and an ever-larger share female), as demonstrated by Liaqat et al. (2024) and shown to be common and increasing over time, constitute the complete annihilation of Pakistan's postgraduate education investment in cases of non-return. Professional migrants who are not BEOE contribute an estimated 24-31 per cent of Pakistan's total remittance inflows and have the highest share of registered emigrants and financial productivity in the less than 0.5 per cent of registered emigrants, thus corroborating Ashraf's (2022b) remittance proxy result and its extension with the volume estimate.

The political economy ramifications of systematic measurement exclusion are serious. Governance priorities are turned around, towards visible and

not towards invisible. Throughout the migration, irregular migrants are not covered by protection. Fiscal costs of irregular migration are invisible, its human costs borne by migrants. All analyses based on BEOE underestimate human capital loss. But none of the governance system sees them as there is no systematic engagement with Pakistan's most economically valuable diaspora group – the professional population which contributes close to one-third of remittance inflows.

There are three institutional changes that need to take place to close the measurement gap. A professional emigration registry from Pakistani High Commissions and Embassies in Western cities, like London, Washington, Toronto and other major cities of the diaspora would bring the non-BEOE population to light for the first time. The introduction of a readmission agreement with the European Union and effective implementation mechanisms would provide a governance system to support irregular migration return management and would give leverage to the bilateral governance on irregular migration reform. To measure student-to-work transitions in Pakistan, it is essential to have an integrated student tracking system between the enrolment data of Pakistani universities and exit data as well as data on foreign university admissions.

A country can't rule a territory which it cannot see. The dark figure in this paper is not only a statistical gap, but a governance gap as well a gap of millions of Pakistani emigrants who either interact with the migration system only through danger or exploitation, or financial transfer, but not through protection, engagement or investment facilitation that a functional migration governance system could deliver. There's no technical problem to overcome to close that divide. It is a challenge of political economy and calls for the same institutional investment and governance will, which has been lacking in the Pakistan's migration governance architecture for more than 4 decades.

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