The Myth of the Misinformed Migrant? Survey Insights from Nigeria's Irregular Migration Epicenter

Bernd Beber

RWI – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research

Alexandra Scacco

WZB Berlin Social Science Center

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Abstract

Policy projections and recent research suggest that large numbers of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa will continue to attempt to make their way to Europe over the next few decades. In response, European countries have made and continue to make significant investments in information campaigns designed to discourage irregular African migration. Despite the ubiquity of these campaigns, we know relatively little about potential migrants' prior knowledge and beliefs. To what extent are potential migrants actually misinformed about the migration journey and destination countries? We bring representative survey data collected in Benin City, Nigeria—a center of irregular migration—to bear on this question. Three key insights emerge. First, potential migrants are better informed about destination contexts than is commonly assumed, and if anything appear to underestimate the economic benefits of life in Europe. Second, they are relatively less well informed about specific risks and other features of the irregular migration journey. Third, we find evidence of optimism bias. Respondents are generally hopeful when asked about Nigerian irregular migrants' prospects of being able to reach and stay in Europe, but they are especially optimistic when asked about their own chances. Taken together, these findings suggest that existing migration-related information campaigns, and with them a central component of migration policies in countries across the Global North, rest on shaky foundations. Most problematically, our study suggests that campaigns risk becoming *mis*information campaigns, particularly when they suggest to potential migrants that they are overestimating the benefits of living in Europe.[1]

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1   Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have attempted to reach Europe over the last decade (Uchehara, 2016; Connor, 2018; UNHCR, 2019), and irregular migration is likely to continue in large numbers for many years to come.[2] While the COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary decline, the number of attempted Mediterranean crossings already began rising again in the summer of 2020 (Schöfberger and Rango1, 2020), and has long since surpassed pre-pandemic levels (Forin and Frouws, 2022).[3]

A key reason for this projection of continued migration from Africa to Europe is structural. Data from the UN World Population Prospects suggests that population growth to 2050 will disproportionately occur in sub-Saharan Africa, while in the past population growth rates have been relatively even across the Global South (Hanson and McIntosh, 2016). Historically, relative labor supply growth has been a key structural predictor of international migration flows (Ranis and Fei, 1961; Harris and Todaro, 1970), as has relative proximity (Mayda, 2010), so Europe is the likely destination of a sustained stream of Africans in search of a better life. The fact that migration networks tend to be self-reinforcing only strengthens this expectation (Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 1999).[4]

No other sub-Saharan country has produced more irregular migrants than Nigeria in the past decade, and the combination of an enduring low-intensity civil war, routine violence and physical insecurity, unfulfilled economic potential, and a young population with frustrated ambitions has led to particularly large outflows from Edo and Delta states, in the country's South-South region. Drawing on original, representative survey data, we estimate that nearly one in four households in Edo's capital, Benin City, had one of its members attempt irregular migration to Europe in 2017, a year when departure figures

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[2]It is difficult to provide good estimates of irregular migration flows. Notable attempts in this area include Afolayan (2009) and Mberu and Pongou (2010). The Nigerian government estimated in 2008 that 59,000 Nigerian citizens were in transit on an irregular migration route to Western Europe at that time (Amalu, 2008). In 2016, embassy estimates placed about 1 million migrants in Libya, with sizable numbers from Niger, Nigeria, and Mali (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

[3]See also Bah et al. (2021) on the relationship between Covid-19 and intentions to migrate irregularly.

[4]Forced migration due to armed conflict may follow different patterns, but note that sub-Saharan Africa has also been the most conflict-prone world region since the end of the Cold War (Mack, 2005).

spiked. Most took the extremely dangerous Central Mediterranean route, where death, injury, sexual violence, forced labor, and imprisonment are routine. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that as many as 100,000 Nigerian migrants were stranded in Libyan prisons awaiting repatriation in 2018.[5]

At the same time, destination countries in Europe—including Germany and others that have been welcoming to refugees from Ukraine and, previously, Syria—have made it extremely difficult for sub-Saharan African migrants to take up legal residence and employment, and have taken to funding a wide variety of interventions in origin countries aimed at pre-journey potential migrants. The year 2015, with skyrocketing arrivals figures in Europe, proved a watershed moment for these campaigns, but they remain popular among policy-makers across Europe today.

Many of these campaigns focus on providing information about the risks and costs of irregular migration journeys and the supposed lack of benefits upon arrival in destination countries. Figure 1 shows several examples (from top to bottom): Danish newspaper advertisements published in Lebanon starting in 2015, which are one of the best-known early examples of this type of policy action and describe Denmark's low levels of public assistance and emphasize that benefits have recently been cut and continue to be on a downward trajectory; German-funded billboards in Afghanistan, in a photo also from 2015 but directing individuals toward a web site that still today forms a key part of German efforts to disseminate migration information[6]; and an ongoing campaign called "Telling the Real Story," which emphasizes the dangers of the irregular migration journey, and is coordinated by UNHCR with funding from the European Union. As attempted crossings of the Mediterranean Sea have returned to pre-pandemic levels, so has the scope of European destination countries' migration information campaigns.

Yet despite the fact that information campaigns are widespread, they are rarely preceded or accompanied by systematic survey-based assessments of what it is potential

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[5]The IOM defines irregular migration as the "movement of persons that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving countries" (IOM 2011).

[6]The statement on the billboard is given in Dari and Pashto, the official languages of Afghanistan, and says: "You're leaving Afghanistan. Are you sure?"

Figure 1: Examples of migration information campaigns

migrants actually believe about the journey and destinations in Europe and elsewhere.[7] Hence it is difficult to say if contemporary interventions provide information that is new, salient, and actionable, as effective campaigns tend to do (Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai, 2014). In this paper we provide such an assessment of beliefs and knowledge, based on a representative survey of 555 households and a set of in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviews with ten migrant returnees.

Relevant existing research falls broadly into four categories. First, several policy organizations—notably the Mixed Migration Center (2021) with its Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi), the United Nations Development Program (2019) with its Scaling Fences study, and the International Organization for Migration (2021) with its Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Flow Monitoring Surveys, and other data collection projects—have made and continue to make crucial survey-based contributions to our understanding of irregular migration from Africa to Europe. However, this work tends to focus on actual migrants who have attempted to reach Europe, rather than the larger set of *potential* migrants (living in settings that produce large numbers of irregular migrants), and thus captures only a selected portion of the picture we would want to understand in designing information campaigns with broad reach.

Second, a number of in-depth qualitative studies speak to expectations and beliefs of migrants and those considering an irregular journey (Belloni, 2016; Dunkerley, 2018; Ikuteyijo, 2020), including work completed as part of the EU-funded Perceptions project, which is investigating potential migrants' narratives and images of Europe (Van Praag and Van Caudenberg, 2020; Ambrosetti, Miccoli, and Strangio, 2021). Some of this research suggests that information campaigns targeting migrants are based on faulty assumptions about what they do or do not know (Alpes and Sørensen, 2015), and raises the question of whether these qualitative insights generalize to larger representative samples.

Third, a set of large-scale existing surveys contains items related to migration as-

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[7]Appendix 1 in Schans and Optekamp (2016) lists a total of 33 migration-related information campaign undertaken by governments, IGOs, and NGOs since 1999, and notes the lack of accompanying research and rigorous impact evaluations. See also Pécoud (2010).

pirations.[8] These include the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, the Gallup World Poll, Afrobarometer, as well as several recent migration-specific surveys, such as the Migration between Africa and Europe (MAFE) survey (Beauchemin et al., 2015), the ongoing, multi-country MIGNEX survey (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2020), and surveys conducted in six West African countries by Kirwin and Anderson (2018). This body of work has produced important statistics about self-reported interest in migration, but does not provide the kind of detailed information about individuals' migration-related knowledge and beliefs that we offer here.

Fourth, a small but important set of recent studies explores how individuals in high-migration settings engage with information about journey risks, and whether information shapes self-reported migration intentions (Mbaye, 2014; European Commission, 2018; Tjaden and Dunsch, 2021, 2022). However, each of these studies works with purposive rather than representative samples. The study that is perhaps most similar to ours, a working paper by Bah and Batista (2020), uses a lab-in-the-field experiment in the Gambia to explore the effect of migration-related information on subjects' expectations about the costs and benefits of irregular migration to Europe, including their likely income at destination, the probability of dying en route and the likelihood of obtaining a work permit. We examine a broader range of potential migrants' beliefs and include a set of verifiable measures of knowledge.

This means that the research presented here—a representative survey containing detailed information about potential migrants' knowledge and beliefs concerning irregular migration in sub-Sahara Africa—has few predecessors anywhere, and none in Nigeria, Africa's largest source of irregular migrants of the last decade, despite the political priority accorded to shaping potential migrants' beliefs via information provision.

A systematic understanding of potential migrants' knowledge and beliefs forms a natural starting point for designing and evaluating migration information interventions. We provide detailed evidence in this vein here, based on a representative survey we conducted in Benin City, Nigeria's foremost center of irregular migration, in October and Novem-

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[8]For an overview, see the exhaustive review surveys by Carling and Mjelva (2021), completed as part of the QuantMig project.

ber 2018. Three key results emerge. First, subjects are relatively well-informed about European destination contexts, more so than is often assumed. They do not generally have unrealistically rosy expectations, but if anything underestimate the economic advantages an average EU resident enjoys. Second, study participants vary widely in their perceptions of migration-related risks, and are in fact quite poorly informed about key logistical features typical to the journey. Third, we provide evidence for optimism bias. Respondents commonly overestimate Nigerians' chances of reaching Europe and being allowed to stay, but they are especially optimistic when it comes to their own personal chances if they tried to migrate irregularly. Taken together, these findings suggest that a number of migration information campaigns, and with them a central prong of the Global North's migration policy strategy, may rest on faulty assumptions.

We begin in Section 2 by explaining why Edo state and in particular Benin City are compelling research sites for this project. Section 3 then presents insights from our survey there. We conclude in Section 4 with a brief discussion of implications for policy and research.

2   Setting

Nigeria is by far sub-Saharan Africa's most populous country and a major source of migrants bound for Europe. It sits at the southern end of a major migrant route—a common variant of which is displayed in Figure 2—that traverses the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea by way of Niger and Libya, a horrific undertaking.[9] Figure 3 shows that Nigerians have made up a major share of contemporary migration flows across the Mediterranean Sea. The figure shows total arrivals in Spain, Italy, Greece, and Cyprus by country of origin for the two years preceding our survey, with Nigerians by far the single largest national group arriving from West or North Africa. Nigerians—both men and women—have also filed far and away the most asylum applications in Europe since 2011, as shown in Figure 4. Most applications are rejected, but not disproportionately

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[9]See for example Taub's evocative 2017 report, for which he followed several teenage girls from Benin City along a large portion of their journey across the desert and the Mediterranean Sea to Italy.
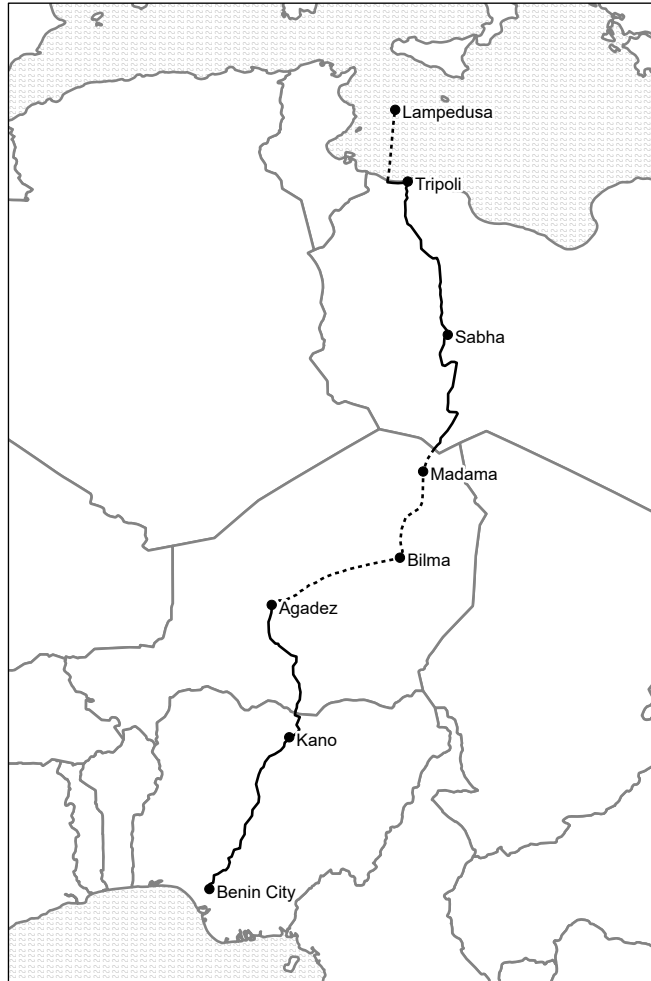
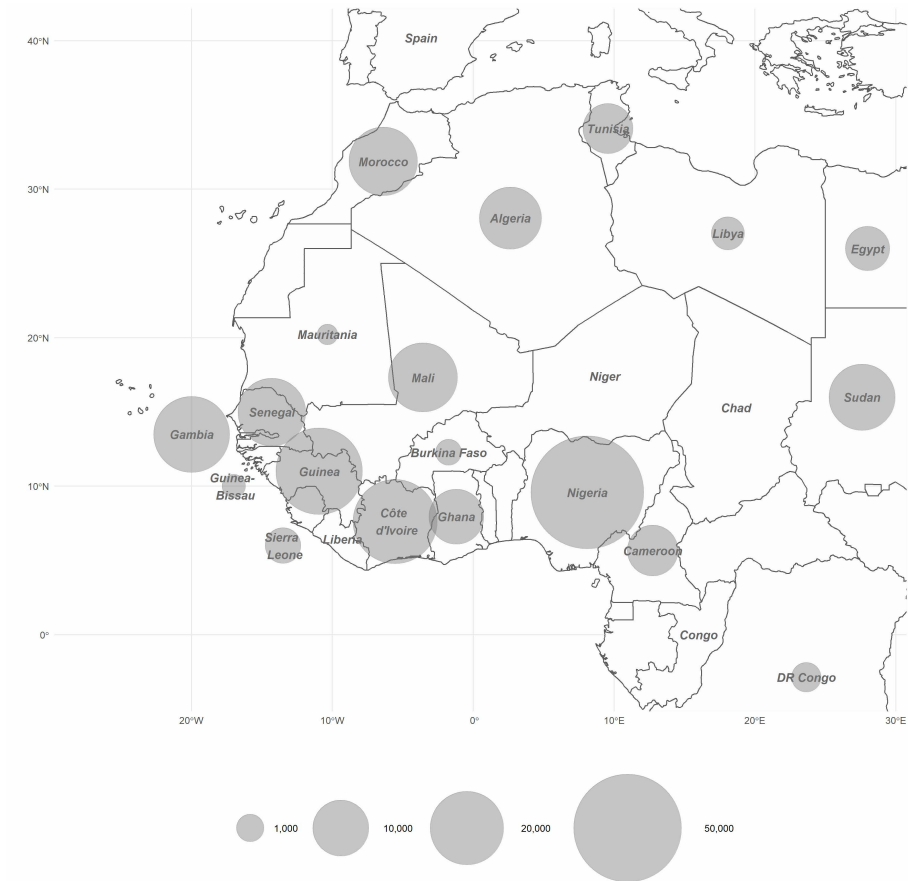Figure 2: Typical migration route from Benin City

Figure 3: Irregular migrants from Africa to Europe, based on data from UNHCR (2019)

so compared to those from other sub-Saharan African countries. Finally, Figure 5 paints a similar picture with respect to European migrant stocks. More than 400,000 Nigerians lived in the EU-28 in 2019, more than from any other country on the African continent.

Nigeria is an important source of irregular migrants, but migrants' places of origin are not uniformly distributed across the country. On the contrary, an astounding share of Nigerian migrants to Europe come from the country's South South region, and within this region from Edo state and especially its capital Benin City, home to an estimated 1.5 million residents and Nigeria's fourth-largest city.

IOM has for years been engaged in assisting the return of large numbers of Nigerians stuck in Libya, many living in almost unspeakably difficult and dangerous conditions. These are Nigerian migrants who attempted but did not complete their journey to Europe ("nearly all" Nigerians assisted by IOM in Libya said they hoped to eventually reach Europe), and most originated in the South South. In a nine-month period in the year
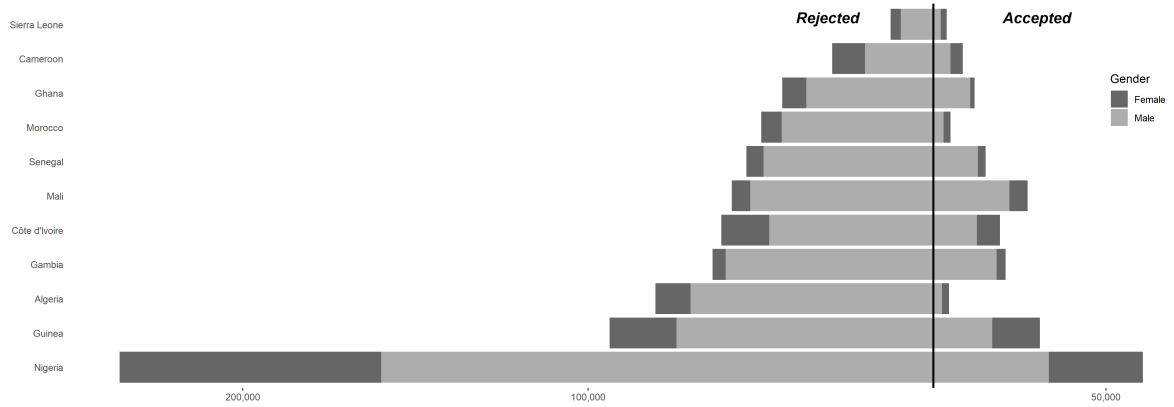
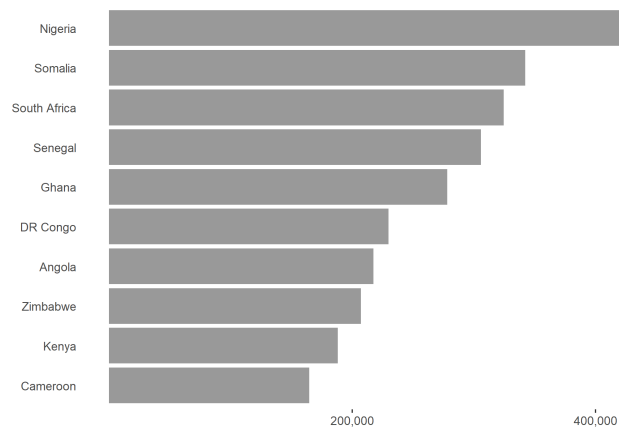Figure 4: Total asylum decisions in the EU-28, 2011–2019, by gender, based on data from Eurostat

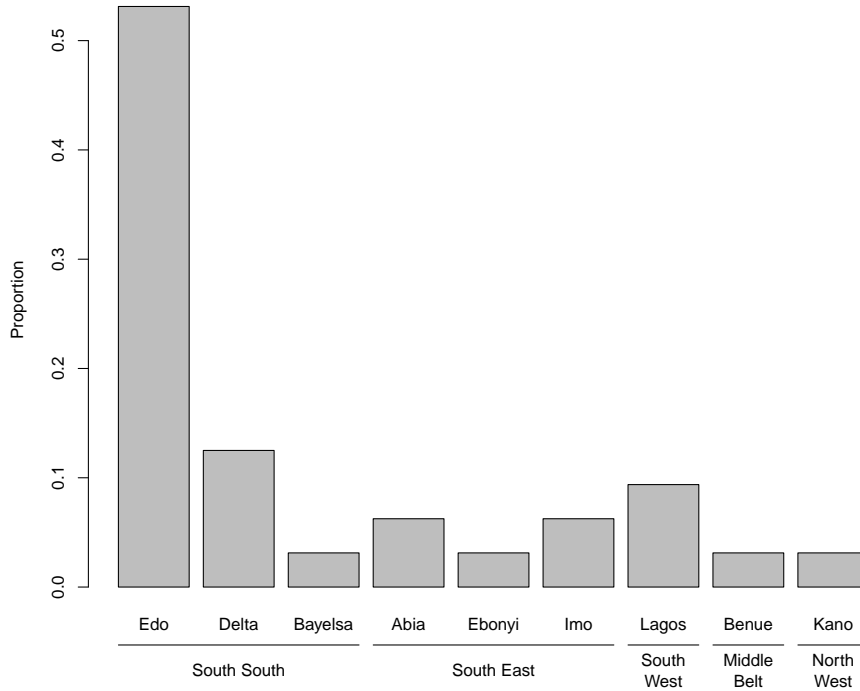Figure 5: Migrant stocks in the EU-28, based on data from UN DESA (2019)

Figure 6: Nigerian states of origin in SOEP Survey of Refugees

prior to our survey, IOM "helped more than 2,400 stranded Nigerian migrants return from Libya ... More than half of them are from Edo state. The rest are from Delta state (about 12 per cent) and other parts of southern Nigeria" (Burpee, 2017).

A data source that covers Nigerians who did manage to make their way to Europe is the IAB-SOEP-BAMF Survey of Refugees, which covered a random sample of migrants present in Germany in 2016.[10] The survey's sample of Nigerians is small at 65 individuals, but half came from Edo state, as shown in Figure 6. Delta, also in the South South region, is the second most common Nigerian state of origin.

Both the domestic and international press have reported on the unusual place Edo state and its capital occupy in the migration corridor to Europe (O'Grady, 2018; Hoffmann, 2018; BBC, 2017; Agbakwuru, 2018), and policy-makers have taken note. The federal government of Nigeria has been working in cooperation with European governments to reduce irregular migration out of the country and has set up Migration Resource Centers with IOM and EU funding in three places: Abuja, where the Ministry of Labour

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[10]Despite its name, the Survey of Refugees is not limited to individuals officially recognized as refugees. The survey's target population includes anyone present in Germany who applied for asylum between 2013 and 2016, i.e. individuals with pending applications, those with refugee, asylum, or subsidiary protection status, and anyone with a suspended deportation order.

and Employment is located; Lagos, the country's largest city by far and its commercial center; and Benin City.

Why is there so much migration from this part of Nigeria? Economic opportunities in the region are scarce, particularly in Edo state. Nigerian rubber production, traditionally the region's major non-oil industry, has been in decline for years. This has frustrated the ambitions of the region's young population. The status of Edo and the South South more broadly as the most important region of origin of Nigerian irregular migrants appears to date back to the 1980s, when a small group of local women were recruited for agricultural labor in Italy, although many in fact ended up working as prostitutes (Okonofua et al., 2004; Damon, Swails, and Laine, 2018).[11] Over time, trafficking networks became entrenched, and traffickers have continued to benefit from economies of scale. As we describe below, migration is now a ubiquitous and normalized option in the region.

3   Insights from a survey in Benin City

We conducted 20 hours of in-depth qualitative interviews with ten migrant returnees who had attempted the Mediterranean route and a survey in October and November of 2018 with a representative sample of 555 households in Benin City, Nigeria's central hub for irregular migration.[12] For sampling purposes, we geolocated all approximately 156,000 residential building structures in the Benin City metropolitan area and grouped them in 102 neighborhoods, as shown in Figure 7.[13] We then randomly sampled 35 neighborhoods, and randomly selected buildings, households, and individuals. We used building density as a proxy for neighborhood wealth and oversampled from poorer areas, which include areas conventionally associated with high out-migration rates.

Enumerators completed household rosters, which allow us to capture in- and out-migration, and an in-depth questionnaire with a household member aged 18–34, the age range within which individuals are particularly likely to migrate irregularly. Among

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[11]Even in recent years, some claim that more than 90% of Nigerian sex workers in Europe hail from Edo state (UNODC, 2009; Nwaubani and Guilbert, 2016, 2017).

[12]We also subsequently designed a related field experiment, which was implemented in Edo and Delta states in 2020 and 2021 (Beber et al., 2022).

[13]A small number of hatched units were excluded for security reasons.

Figure 7: Geolocated buildings and neighborhoods in Benin City

contacted households, 11.8% refused participation, a relatively high rate for an in-person survey in a developing sub-Saharan African context, but still low enough to have limited potential impact on our estimates. Refusal is not significantly correlated with house quality indicators, which we were able to collect for all sampled residences. Less than one percent of sampled individual household members refused participation, given prior household consent. Among participating household, 8.6% did not contain any members within our target age range.

We first describe below that, as expected, out-migration is a common feature of life in Benin City, in line with its reputation as a center of irregular migration. We then use the survey to learn about subjects' prior beliefs about destination countries and the migration journey. To what extent are potential migrants actually misinformed? Three insights emerge. First, potential migrants may be better informed about destination contexts than information campaigns assume. Second, they seem to lack knowledge about key aspects of the migration journey. Third, subjects are optimistic about Nigerians' and especially their own personal ability to migrate successfully, suggesting optimism bias.

Migration rates Our survey data is consistent with previous reports about Benin City as a migration hotspot. The proportion of households with someone who left to "follow

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land" (a common local term for migrating irregularly along the Mediterranean route) in the previous year is 23%, which is equivalent to two-thirds of those who left with the aim of going to Europe. One-third of randomly sampled individuals say they have a family member abroad who "travelled by routes" (another term used locally to refer to irregular migration), most commonly in Italy. Interest in migration in this context is extremely high. Two-thirds say they are interested "a lot" or "a fair amount" in living in another country, mostly in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany. This is consistent with reports from Pew (Connor, 2018) and Gallup (Esipova, Ray, and Pugliese, 2017), which show similarly high rates of interest among Nigerians in living abroad.[14] Fewer respondents are interested in actually migrating irregularly, as one would expect, but the numbers are considerable nonetheless, with 26% of men and 21% of women saying they are interested "a lot" or "a fair amount" in following land in a self-administered item.

Beliefs about Europe The qualitative interviews we conducted with returned migrants suggest that they held largely realistic pre-migration expectations about their potential economic prospects in Europe. They appeared savvy about economic conditions ("I knew Italy would be too tough with the economic crisis") and their own employability ("I thought I could find some hairdressing work or maybe work as a housemaid or a babysitter").[15] None voiced expectations in line with some of the "rumors about Germany" that the German government has campaigned for the past five years to dispel, such as "Germany grants a house to every refugee" (Federal Foreign Office, 2017).

We see similar patterns in our survey data. Figure 8 shows histograms of the responses to four incentivized knowledge items.[16] Vertical dashed lines mark the correct figures. In the first panel, we see that respondents actually underestimate monthly European

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[14]Note that a majority of our respondents also say that they are interested "a lot" or "a fair amount" in moving elsewhere in Nigeria, so the desire to leave reflects frustrations with local conditions that might well go beyond those found in many other parts of Nigeria.

[15]Note that this interviewed returnee and others never reached Europe, but got stuck in Libya, in the case of this particular individual from 2015 until 2018.

[16]Respondents received 50 Naira phone credit for each response that was in the top half of best guesses, in addition to their 500 Naira participation payment.
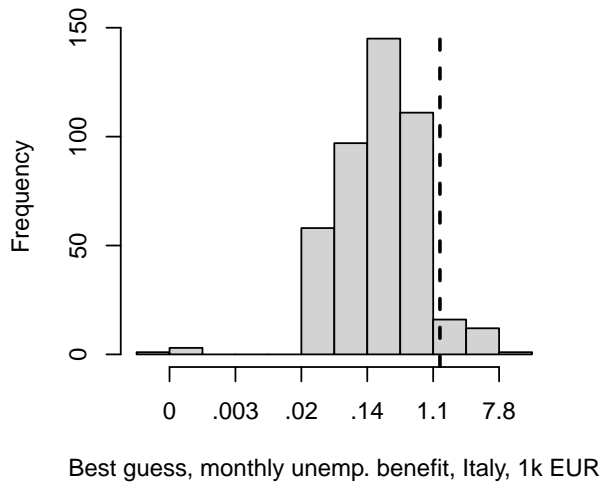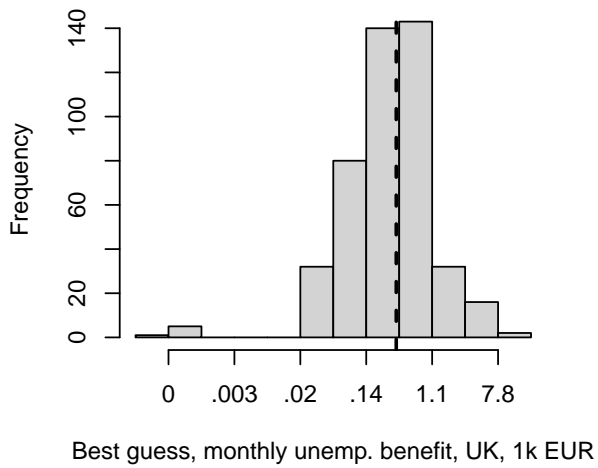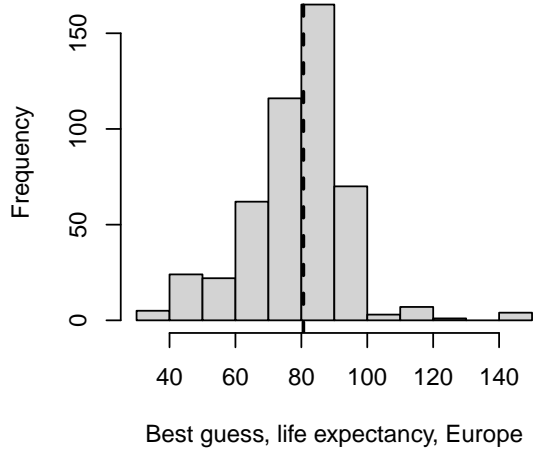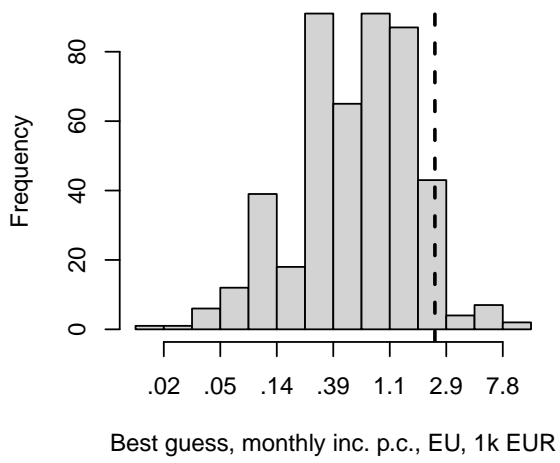
Figure 8: Beliefs about Europe

per capita income.[17] Their guesses concerning the life expectancy in Europe, seen in the second panel, are roughly centered on the correct response.[18] The two panels on the bottom of Figure 8 show guesses of average monthly unemployment benefits, for the UK and Italy respectively.[19] For the UK, the average response is again close to the correct figure, and for Italy respondents underestimate the support provided to the eligible unemployed.[20] On average respondents do not appear to believe that livelihoods in Europe, as captured here, are better than they actually are, and in some cases they appear to undervalue advantages of life in Europe.

This leads us to suspect that an intervention focused on providing truthful information about economic life in Europe may well lead to an increase in intended or actual migration along the Mediterranean Route. It also suggests that information campaigns that attempt to lower expectations about the economic benefits of life in Europe risk becoming *mis*information campaigns.

Figures 9 and 10 show the same histograms for the subsamples of respondents who are or are not in any way interested in "following land across the desert and the water to go to another country." The average subject in either subsample is close to correct (life expectancy, unemployment benefits in the UK) or underestimates the advantages of life in Europe (income, unemployment benefits in Italy), so our finding concerning beliefs about Europe is not driven by respondents that are not actually interested in making it there.[21]

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[17]We show income and benefits in thousands of Euros, on a logged scale. The survey asked about amounts in Naira. This specific item reads, "What do you think is the average personal income for people living in Europe per month, in Naira?" The dashed line corresponds to GNI per capita in current USD for the EU in 2017 (World Bank, 2018*a*).

[18]The survey item reads, "What is the life expectancy in Europe? How old will a person get to be in Europe on average?" The dashed line corresponds to total life expectancy at birth in years for the EU in 2017 (World Bank, 2018*b*).

[19]We display monthly amounts. The survey asked about estimates of weekly support: "If a resident of the UK [Italy] loses his or her job and is eligible for help from the government, how much money (in Naira) do you think that person receives from the government per week?" For the UK, the dashed line reflects Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) benefits (UK Government, 2018). For Italy, it corresponds to payments from the New Social Employment Insurance (NASpl) (Iudicone and Arca Sedda, 2015). In each case we show the maximum benefit for which an individual could have been eligible in 2017.

[20]Guesses for Italy are notably closer to the correct value among subjects with a migrant household or family member, as we show in Figure S.2 in the supplementary materials.

[21]The means of the distributions across these two figures differ in all four cases, but not consistently in one direction (on average, those interested in irregular migration believe that Europeans earn more and live longer, but receive less unemployment support in Italy and the UK, compared to the beliefs of
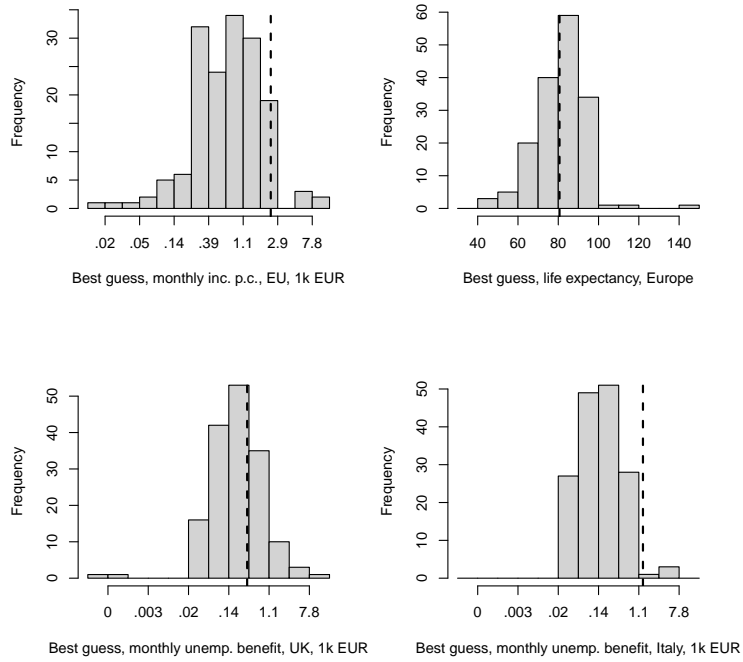
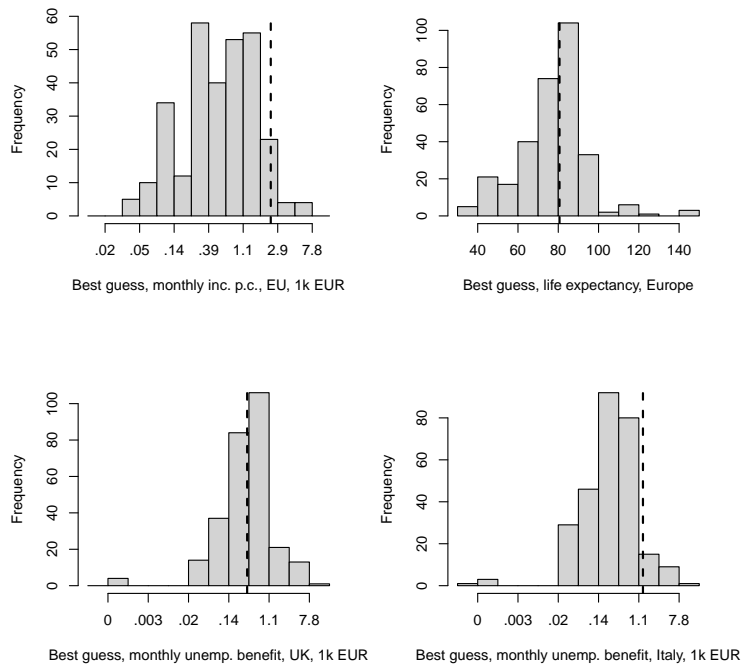Figure 9: Beliefs about Europe among those interested in irregular migration

Figure 10: Beliefs about Europe among those not interested in irregular migration

Risks of the journey   Many of our survey respondents guess that there are significant risks associated with the journey. Figure 11 shows subjects' estimates of the percentage of irregular migrants that suffer injury, death, sexual abuse, and slavery, respectively.[22] Several features of the graphs suggest community-wide uncertainty about journey risks. We observe spikes at the midrange focal point of 50 in all four histograms; aside from this midpoint spike, the graphs are relatively flat; and the distribution of guesses shows substantial support across its full domain. This suggests relatively poorly informed respondents.[23]

It is reasonable to ask why there is so much disagreement on perceived risks in a setting where irregular migration is so common. One possibility is that beliefs differ according to respondents' interest in attempting the journey. As before, we show separate histograms in Figures 12 and 13 for those interested in "following land" and those who are not. Overall, the two subsamples look broadly similar, with wide variation in perceived risks. A notable difference, however, concerns estimated death rates. Here, the guesses of those who express a personal interest in attempting irregular migration are significantly lower on average and very rarely reach the high figures seen frequently for the other indicators. This makes some sense: An interest in irregular migration would appear incompatible with a belief that nearly everyone dies along the route.[24]

Knowledge about features of the journey   We now turn to questions about specific well-established aspects of the journey along the Central Mediterranean route, as faced by migrants at the time of our survey. Consistent with an interpretation of community-wide

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those who are not interested in irregular migration). Note also that interest in irregular migration does not consistently correlate with improved accuracy. In fact, only for the income measure does accuracy improve on average.

[22]The survey reads, "When you think about 100 people leaving Nigeria in the last year to follow land across the desert and the water to Europe, how many of them have the following happen to them: (a) Physical injury or illness. (b) Death. (c) Sexual abuse, sexual violence, forced prostitution. (d) Abduction, kidnapping, slavery."

[23]We show self-reported levels of uncertainty in Figures S.4 and Figures S.7 in the supplementary materials.

[24]The supplementary materials break down beliefs about Europe and perceptions by whether respondents have a migrant household or family member (in Figure S.2) as well as across genders (in Figure S.3). Having a migrant relation is associated with higher estimated death rates, and men are more optimistic about injury and death rates than women. Our key observations persist in each of these particular subsamples, in the sense that we see reasonably accurate beliefs about Europe, a wide dispersion of beliefs about risks, and optimism about migrating successfully.
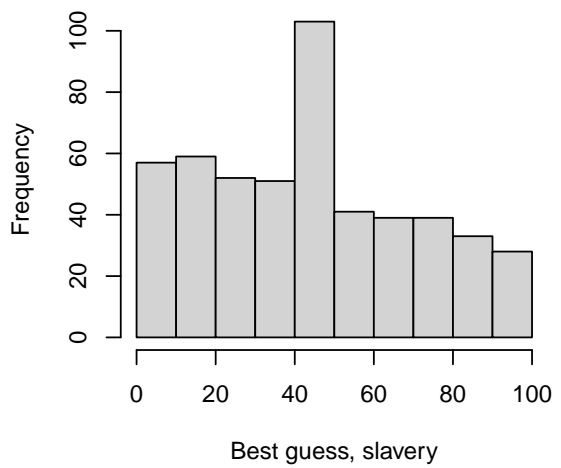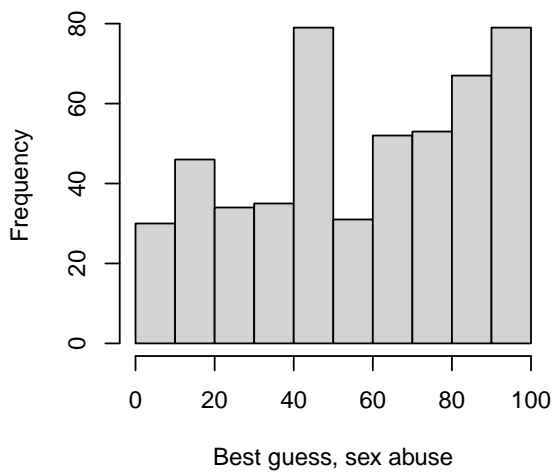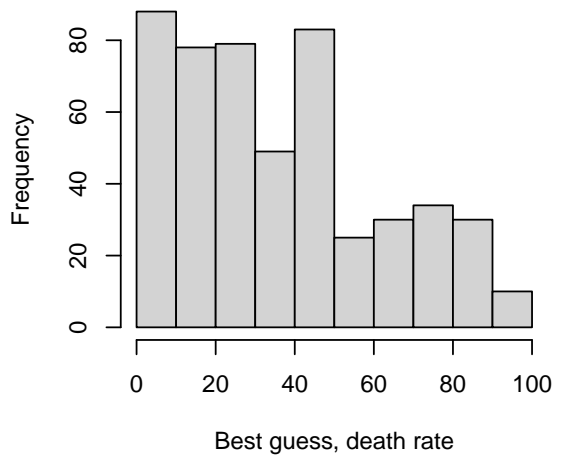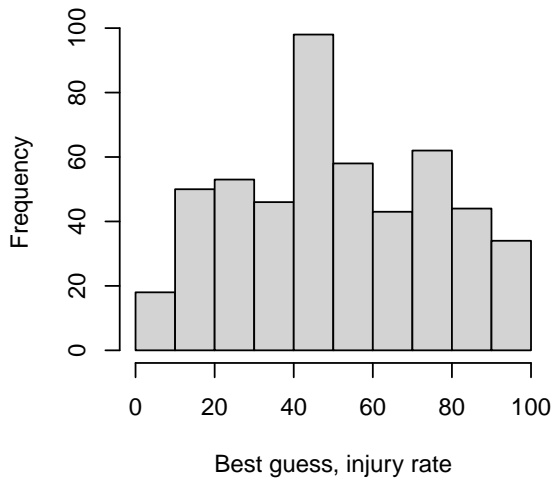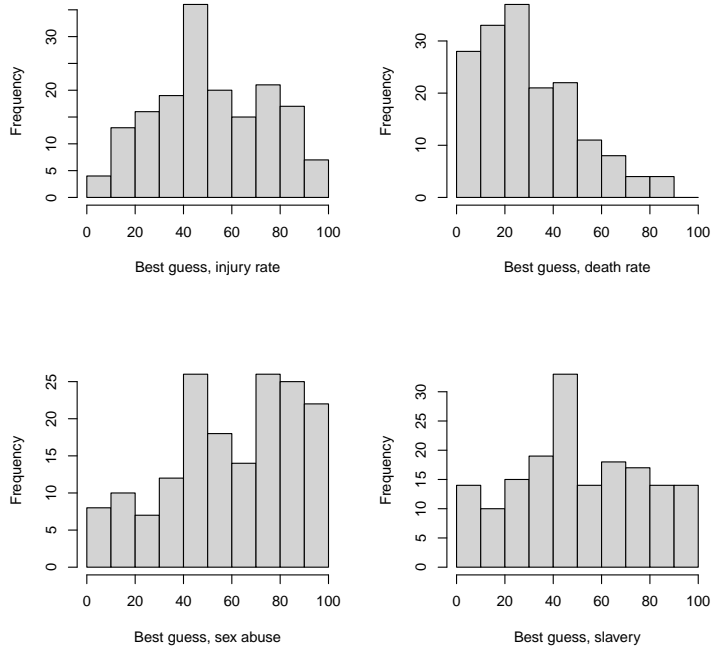
Figure 11: Beliefs about the journey

Figure 12: Beliefs about the journey among those interested in irregular migration
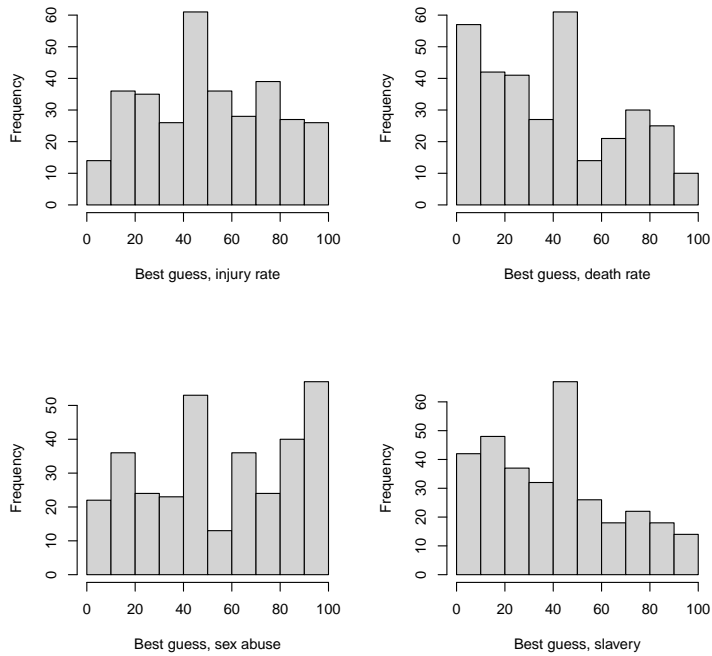

Figure 13: Beliefs about the journey among those not interested in irregular migration
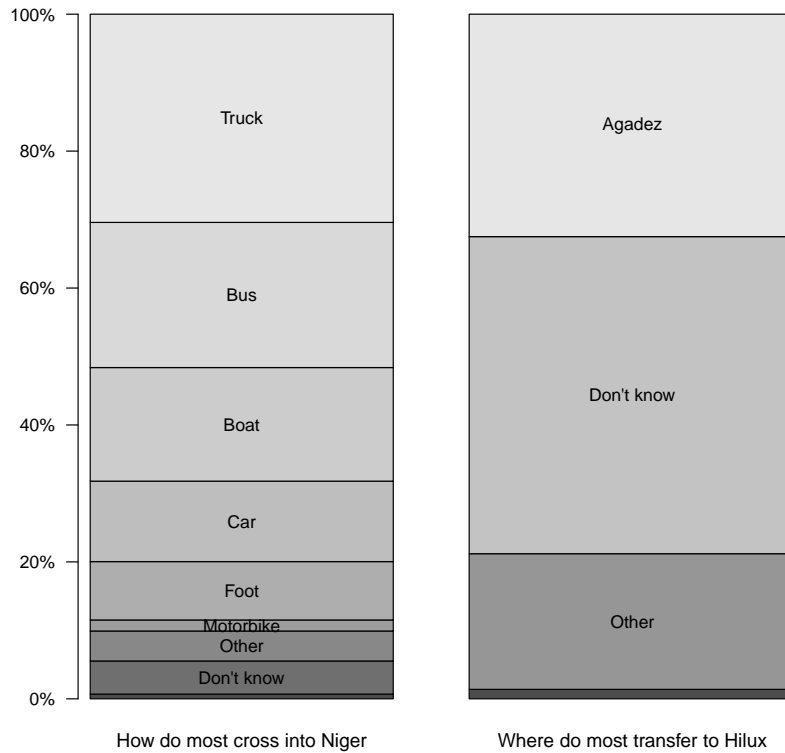
Figure 14: Knowledge about the journey

uncertainty about what transpires when individuals "follow land," we find that many respondents appear to know little about the actual mechanics of the irregular migration journey.

First, Figure 14 shows responses to two knowledge questions about the route. On the left side, we display answers to the question how most migrants cross into Niger to the north of Nigeria.[25] The vast majority of Nigerians on the Mediterranean route cross on the back of off-road motorbikes. In fact, all ten of the returnees with whom we conducted qualitative interviews had crossed the border in this manner. But survey respondents appear almost entirely unaware of this, with only about 1% giving the correct response. By contrast, about 15% said boat or ship (or balloon, the local parlance for inflatable dinghies). Remarkably, the question was administered as a closed item and "boat" was not included as a response option.[26] Enumerators had to enter these responses in an open

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[25] "When you think about people leaving Nigeria to follow land to Europe, how do most of them cross into Niger?"

[26] This was due to the fact that the relevant Nigeria-Niger border necessitates a land crossing. The Yobe river and remnants of Lake Chad form a small portion of the Nigeria-Niger border in the far northeast, but Boko Haram has been active in this area and to our knowledge no migration routes pass
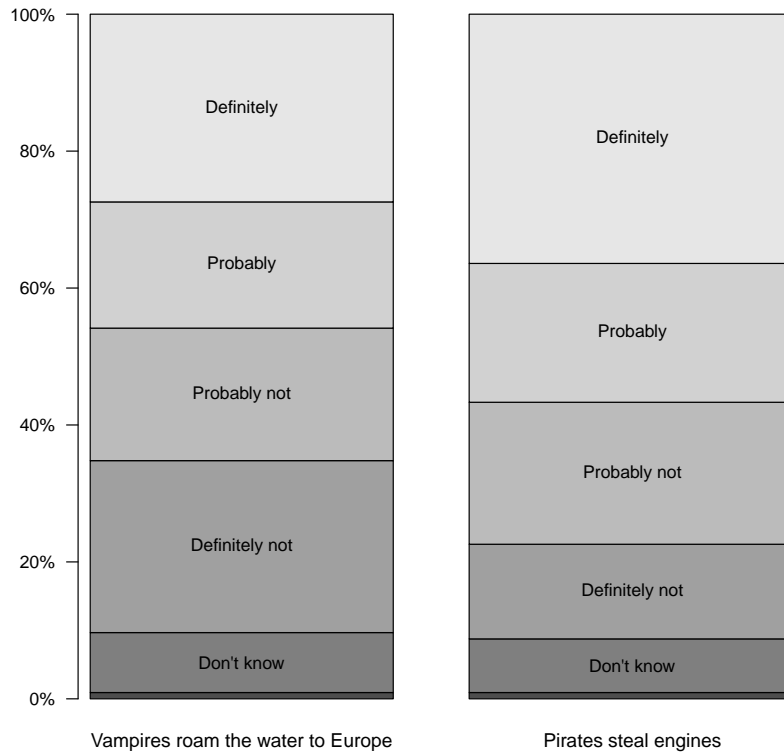
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Figure 15: Real and fictional threats

text field after selecting "other."[27]

On the right side, we show that most respondents did not know where migrants typically transfer to the Toyota Hilux pickup trucks that take them into Libya.[28] Only a third of respondents knew that this prominent connection point is Agadez, by far the largest city in central Niger.

We also assessed to what extent respondents distinguish real from fictional threats associated with the migration journey. In Figure 15, we see how respondents assess the veracity of two types of stories that have circulated in Nigeria: fictional accounts of vampires roaming the Mediterranean and consuming migrants who go overboard (on the left),[29] and stories based on true, widely reported accounts of Libyan pirates stealing the engines of migrant-carrying vessels at sea (on the right), leaving passengers at an

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through this part of the country.

[27]This suggests that this unusual response pattern is not the result of fatigue or inattentiveness. Enumerators were instructed to emphasize that this item concerns the crossing into Niger.

[28]"Many people cross the Sahara desert on the back of Hilux trucks. What is the name of the town where most people leaving Nigeria transfer to these trucks?"

[29]"Do you think the following is true: There are vampires that roam the water to Europe."

even greater risk in an already perilous attempt at crossing the water.[30] We see that respondents are more likely to believe that pirates pose a threat, as we would expect, but more than half of those who have an opinion concerning vampires in the water to Europe say that this is "probably" or "definitely" true. This suggests that, even in a context with high levels of irregular migration to Europe, it is difficult for potential migrants to distinguish between true and false risks.[31]

Optimism bias While we observe wide-ranging beliefs concerning the risks migrants generally face on their journey to Europe, there is broad agreement among our respondents that they themselves would be able to reach and stay in Europe if they tried. Figure 16 shows that four in five respondents believe it is "somewhat" or "very likely" that they would be able to go to Europe.[32] Nearly the same share of respondents think that their asylum claim would be successful.[33] Of course we do not know whether a particular individual's self-assessment of his or her own migration and asylum prospects is implausibly optimistic, but on average respondents appear to vastly overestimate their own odds of migrating successfully to Europe.[34]

To a certain degree, this reflects optimism about all Nigerians' chances of making it to Europe and being allowed to stay there. Figure 17 shows subjects' beliefs about asylum acceptance rates for Nigerians that file a claim in Europe, which we can benchmark against the true rate, displayed as before by way of a dotted line.[35] As with beliefs about the risks of the journey, we see evidence of community-level uncertainty in the form of a relatively flat distribution, with support across its domain, and a spike at the focal

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[30] "Do you think the following is true: There are sea pirates that steal the engines of boats trying to cross the water to Europe."

[31] Nigerians are not alone in the degree to which they believe in supernatural phenomena. A recent representative poll in the United States found that 22% of the adult population believes that demons "definitely exist," with another 24% saying that they "probably exist." Similarly, 45% of adult Americans believe ghosts definitely or probably exist, and 13% express this belief with respect to vampires (YouGov, 2019).

[32] "How likely do you think it is that you would be able to go yonder all the way to Europe, if you wanted to?"

[33] "If you applied for asylum in Europe, how likely do you think it is that your claim would be accepted?"

[34] Fewer than one in four asylum applications from Nigerians (28,130 out of 122,040) were accepted from 2011 to 2017 (Eurostat). We do not know exactly how many Nigerians who try to reach Europe do in fact make it to the continent, but most did not progress beyond Libya at the time of the survey.

[35] The relevant incentivized survey item reads: "Out of 100 Nigerians that apply for asylum in Europe, how many do you think are allowed to stay?"
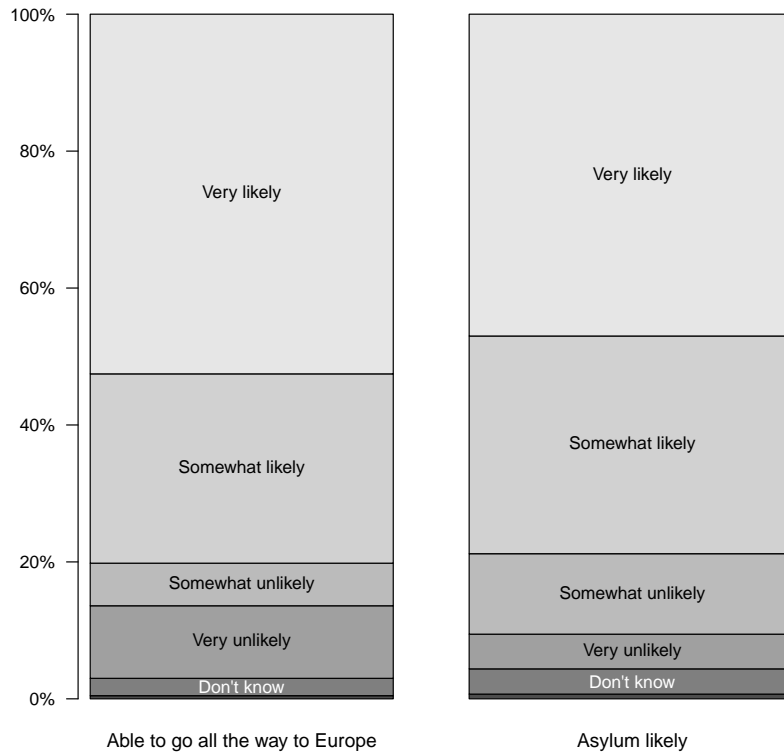
Figure 16: Beliefs about own potential journey

point of 50%. But clearly respondents are more optimistic about Nigerians' prospects for asylum than the facts would indicate, and a comparison of Figure 17 with the right-hand side panel of Figure 16 suggests that their optimism only intensifies when they are considering their *own* chances.

Figure 18 presents another way to capture how optimistic respondents are with respect to the challenges and costs of their own potential relocation to Europe. Here we compare respondents' expected monthly wages in Europe (on the left side) with the monthly wages that they would need to receive in Nigeria in order for them to prefer staying (on the right side).[36] We can think of the difference between a respondent's European wage expectation and his or her reservation wage for staying in Nigeria as an implicit measure of the expected personal cost of migration. If potential migrants think the journey is highly burdensome (in terms of literal expenses, or in terms of the probability of not reaching

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[36]We show histograms of the logged values, in thousands of Euros. The survey items read, (a) "If you got to live in Europe, how much money do you think you would be able to earn per month (in Naira)?", and (b) "How much money would you say you need to earn per month (in Naira) to not think about leaving for Europe?"
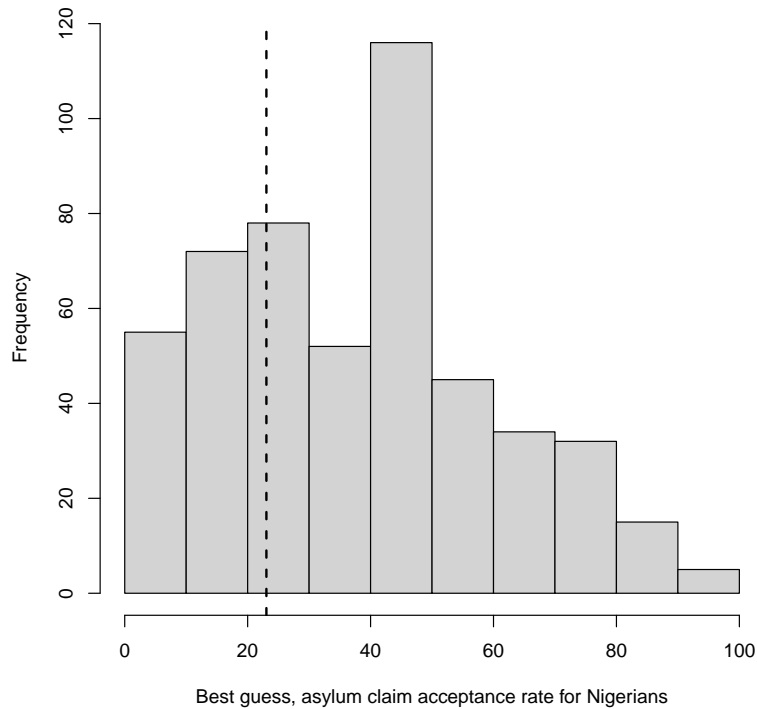
Figure 17: Beliefs about asylum

their European destination), then their reservation wage should be correspondingly lower. Conversely, if they consider the costs of relocation negligible, only a monthly Nigerian income close to what they think they would be able to earn in Europe will be sufficient to deter migration.

The similarity of the histograms suggests that the latter is the case here. The median value for both individually expected monthly wages in Europe and reservation wages in Nigeria is ₦200,000 (€490).[37] The modal individual difference between the two (plausibly the expected cost of relocation and displacement) is precisely zero.[38] Remarkably, the typical respondent says that he or she will be content to stay only once Nigerian wages approximate expected European earnings, which implies perceived relocation costs of basically zero and/or substantial non-income utility associated with leaving.[39] This calls

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[37]We do not think this reflects a lack of engagement or sophistication in responding to the survey. Note for example that the median guess for the average monthly income in Europe is ₦270,000 (€660), so respondents do take into account that their wage potential in Europe is likely to be below average.

[38]Note that this is not due to these questions being asked sequentially and respondents reducing their cognitive load by providing the same amount twice in a row. The relevant items were separated by about thirty other questions.

[39]Figure S.1 in the supplementary materials shows survey results that suggest life in Benin City is
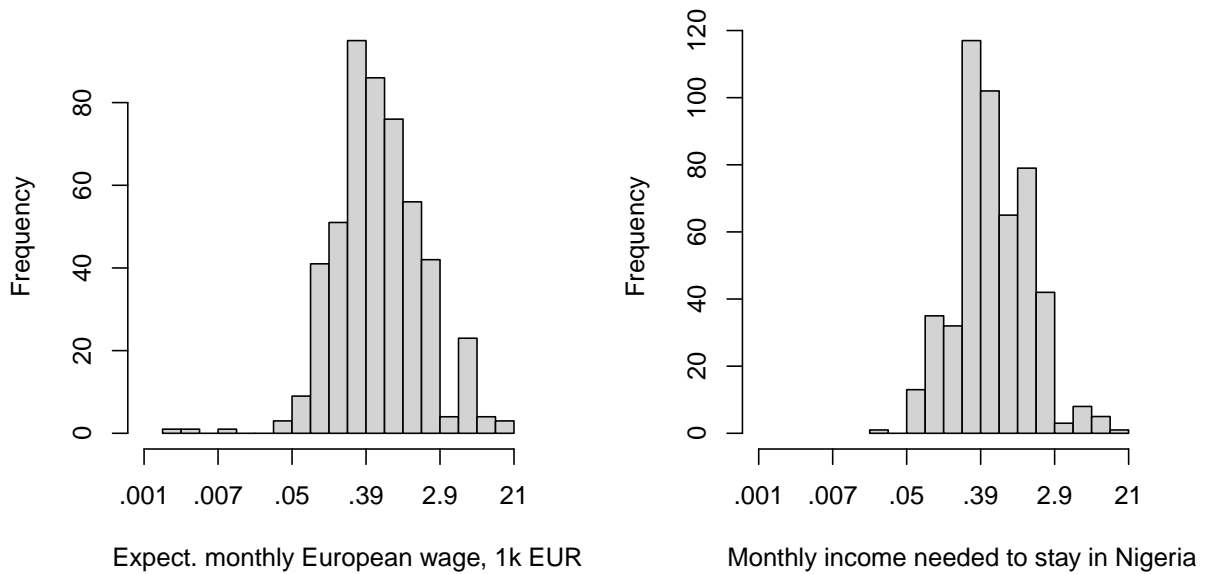
Figure 18: Expected European wages and reservation values

into question development initiatives that aim to improve economic livelihoods in order to reduce irregular migration. It is difficult to see how they could convince Nigerians in Benin City to stay.[40]

Local norms about irregular migration Given how many people had already migrated in the previous fifteen years and the high number of migrant returnees now back in Benin City, why does misinformation persist? Traffickers and others with a vested interest in the enormously profitable irregular migration business actively spread misinformation. More generally, information in circulation appears to be biased in favor of relatively rare successful cases, and the reach of those cases is amplified by social media. Furthermore, those who "make it" in Europe tend to invest in visible ways at home (e.g. in real estate), and interviewees frequently mentioned that they felt pressure from friends and peers to "give it a try."

Figure 19 shows how this is reflected in perceptions of community norms about migration. We asked respondents what share of their neighborhood would agree that people

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indeed characterized by low trust, routine violence and altercations, and interactions with a predatory state.

[40]Improved economic conditions could in fact enable additional potential migrants to leave. This potential second-order effect does not, in our view, undercut the rationale for interventions that lead to improvements in the lives of the poor.
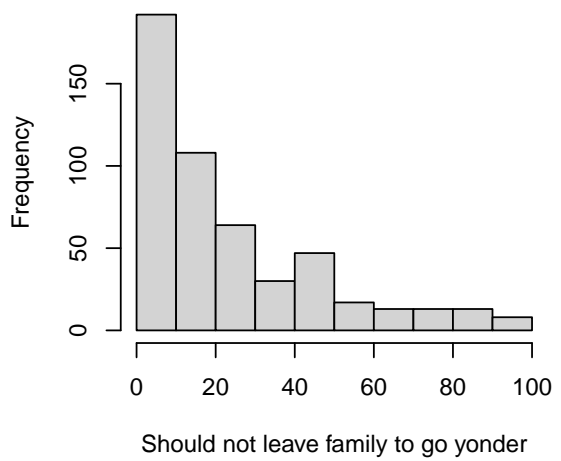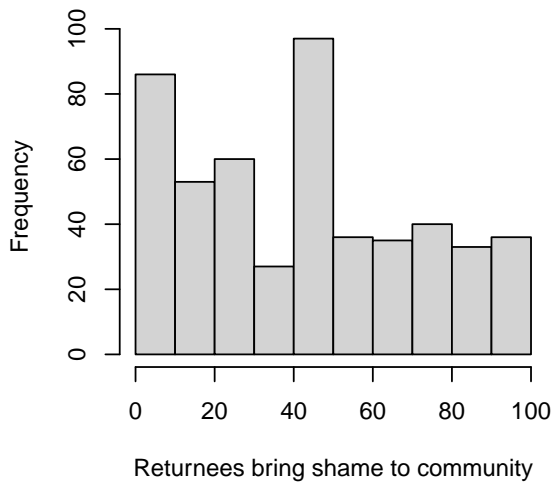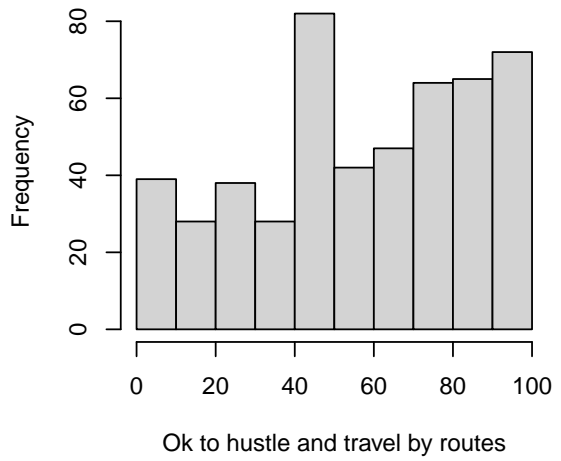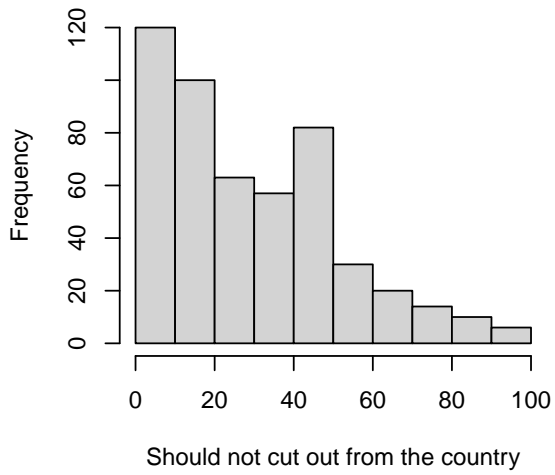
Figure 19: Beliefs about community norms

should not "cut out from the country," that it is is okay to want "go hustle and travel by routes," that returnees "bring shame to the community," and that one should not "leave family to go yonder."[41] Perceived norms are remarkably pro-migration. Most respondents think that there is little to no shame in trying to migrate irregularly.

4 Conclusion

The current mood in political science is one of skepticism toward information interventions. One widely cited experiment found that providing information about politicians' performance does not straightforwardly strengthen electoral accountability (Chong et al., 2015), as did a later jointly pre-registered set of multi-site field trials across six countries (Dunning et al., 2019). Other types of civic engagement appear similarly non-responsive to "bottom-up, citizen-oriented" information treatments (Raffler, Posner, and Parkerson, 2022). One possible road-map toward interventions that are likely to be efficacious can be found in Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai (2014), who suggest that information should be new, salient, and actionable.

An implied first step then in designing an information campaign is to systematically collect data that accurately captures what members of a target population know, care about, and believe they can act on. Yet this first step is rarely taken before policy actors provide migration-related information. Perceptive and challenging research work has been done in the migration field, also with a focus on the sub-Saharan African context, but this paper is the first in this area—jointly with a contemporaneous effort in the Gambia—to provide representative survey evidence on the state of knowledge and beliefs of potential migrants, and certainly the first in what has arguably been the single most important point of departure for migrants from Africa toward Europe in the last decade, Benin City in Nigeria.

We uncover three key insights. First, potential migrants are not excessively sanguine

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[41] "When you think about 100 people in your neighborhood, how many would you say agree with the following statements: (a) People from the neighborhood should not cut out from the country. (b) It is okay to want go hustle and travel by routes. (c) Returnees bring shame to the community. (d) You should not leave your family to go yonder."

about life in destination countries, appear reasonably well-informed, and if anything underestimate the economically people in Europe tend to be compared to them. Second, they are less knowledgeable about core features of the irregular migration journey, and beliefs about risks are widely dispersed. Third, we observe biased thinking in the degree to which respondents are convinced that they personally could make the journey and settle in Europe, a level of optimism that appears to exceed the already substantial optimism respondents express with respect to Nigerians' chances overall.

We infer from this for policy that there is space to design and implement effective migration information campaigns, particularly if they provide information about irregular journeys or if they attempt to address the gap between the perceptions of risks to others and risks to oneself. But we also note with concern that information campaigns focused on life in destination countries could inadvertently encourage deadly irregular migration attempts if they portray economic conditions honestly—or risk engaging in deception if they do not.

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The Myth of the Misinformed Migrant? Survey Insights from Nigeria's Irregular Migration Epicenter

Bernd Beber

RWI – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research

Alexandra Scacco

WZB Berlin Social Science Center
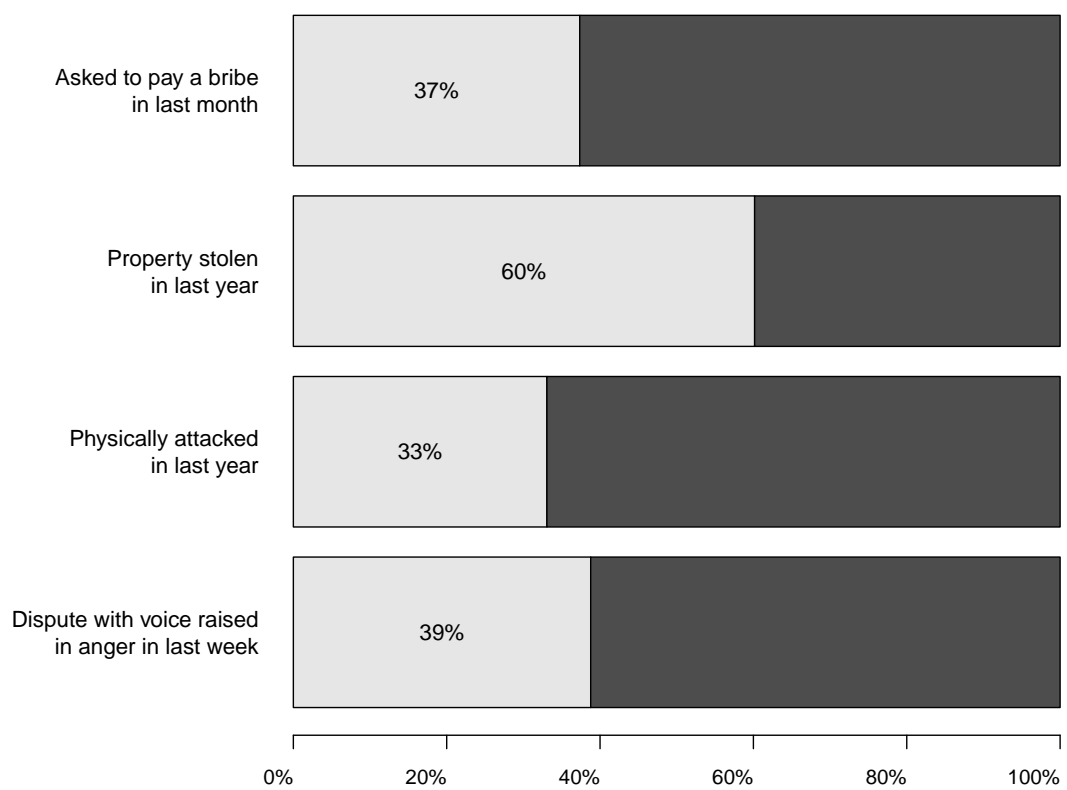
— Supplementary materials —

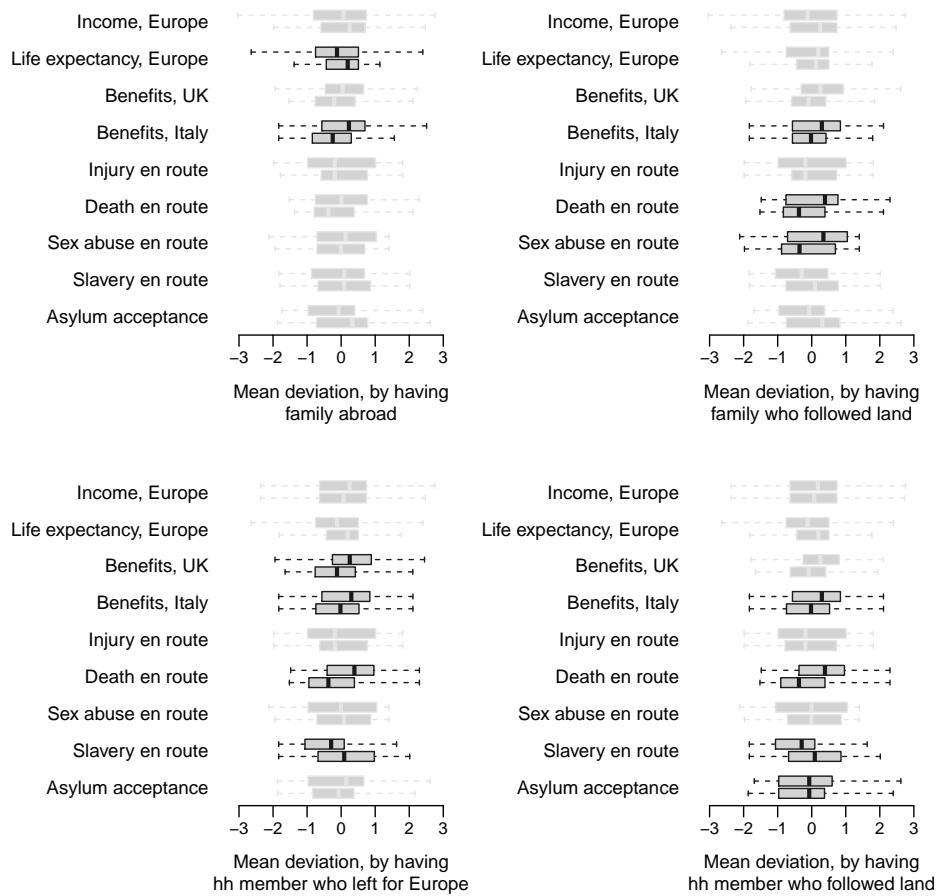Figure S.1: Shares reporting stressful conditions at point of origin

Figure S.2: Box plots of migration-related beliefs, for subsamples with and without a migrant household or family member (top and bottom of each row, respectively), significant mean differences in black
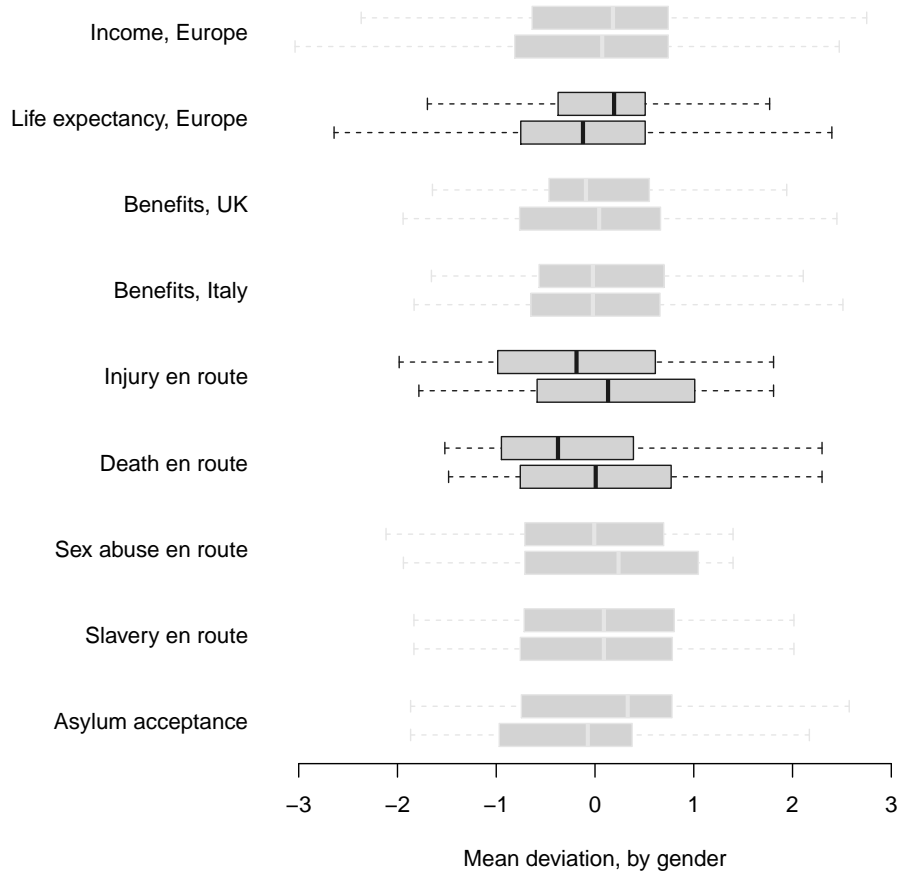
Figure S.3: Box plots of migration-related beliefs, for male and female subsamples (top and bottom of each row, respectively), significant mean differences in black

Self-reported uncertainty   The histograms in Figures S.4 and S.5 replicate Figures 9 and 10, but are now shaded to reflect responses on companion items in which subjects where asked how sure they are about their guesses about life in Europe. Darker colors reflect greater reported certainty. We see little variation here across items or subsamples.

Figures S.6 and S.7 replicate Figures 12 and 13, again with shading to reflect self-reported uncertainty. Here too we do not observe meaningful differences in self-reported uncertainty across those interested in irregular migration and those who are not.
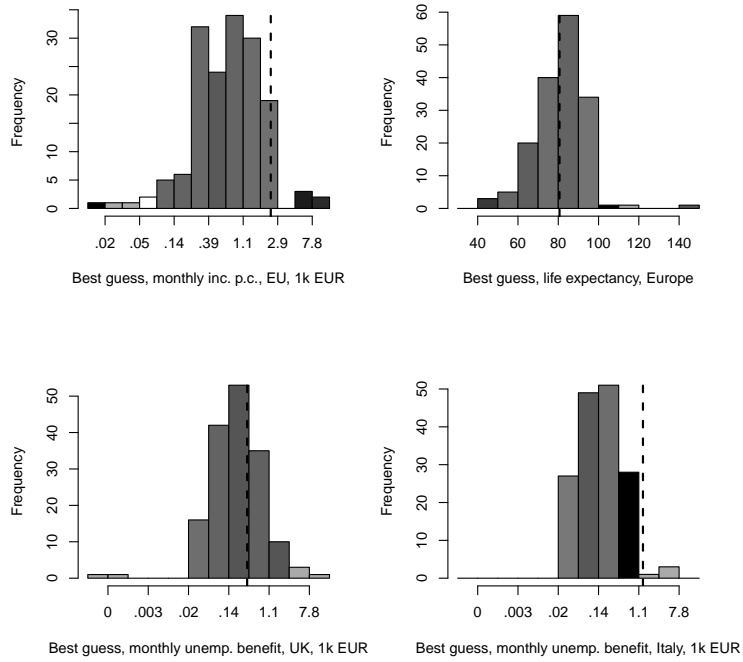
Figure S.4: Beliefs about Europe among those interested in irregular migration
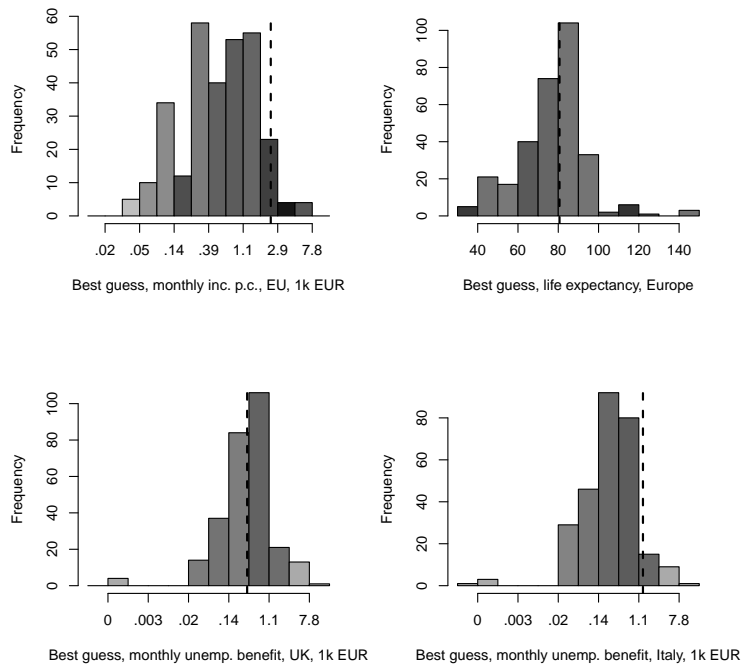

Figure S.5: Beliefs about Europe among those not interested in irregular migration
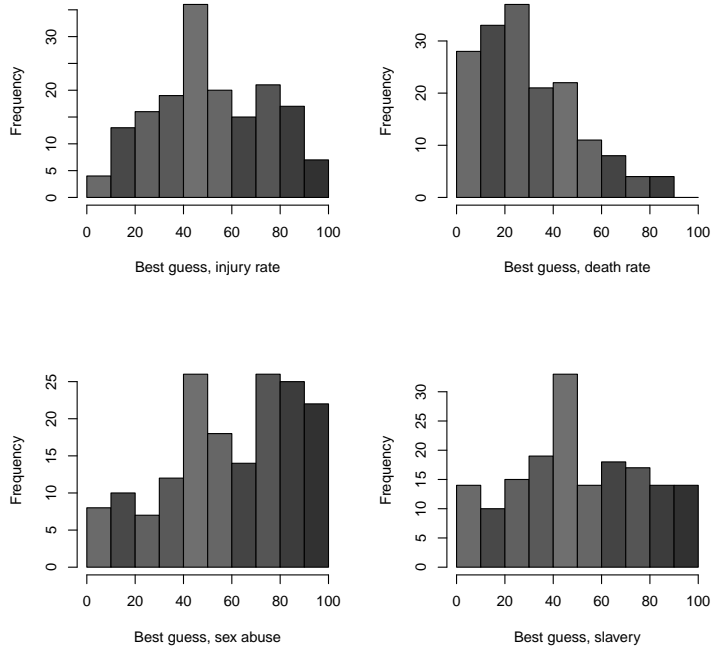
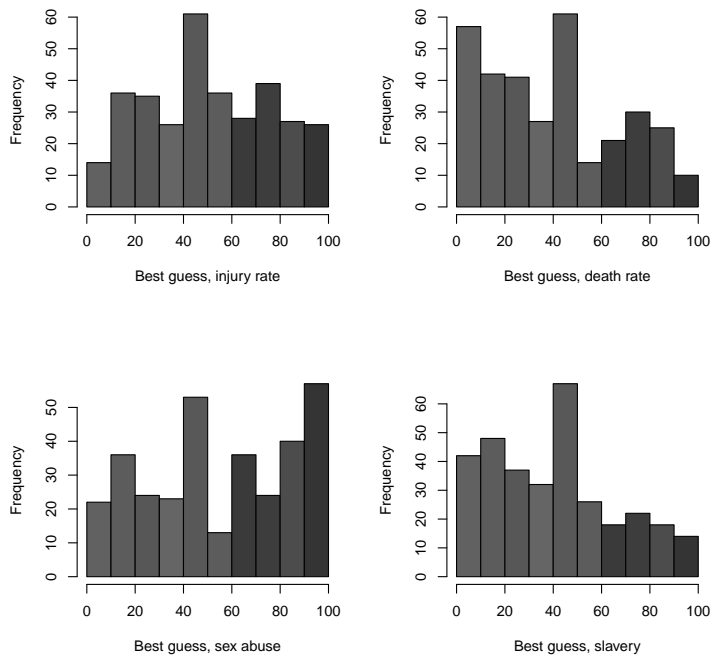Figure S.6: Beliefs about the journey among those interested in irregular migration

Figure S.7: Beliefs about the journey among those not interested in irregular migration