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 survey data that we collected in the fall of 2018 in the Nigerian city of Benin, a center of irregular migration, to bear on this question. Three insights emerge. First, potential migrants may be better informed about destination contexts than ubiquitous information campaigns assume. Second, they seem relatively less informed about features of the migration journey. Third, we find evidence of motivated reasoning: Respondents are considerably more optimistic about their own chances of migrating successfully than they are about Nigerians’ chances overall.
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), and irregular migration is likely to continue in large numbers for many years to come. A key reason for this projection is structural. Data from the UN World Population Prospects suggests that population growth to 2050 will disproportionately occur in sub-Saharan Africa, while historically population growth rates have been relatively even across the Global South (Hanson and McIntosh, 2016). Relative labor supply growth has been a key structural predictor of international migration flows (Ranis and Fei, 1961; Harris and Todaro, 1970), as have contiguity and—more generally—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).

No other sub-Saharan country produces more irregular migrants than Nigeria, 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 massive outflows from Edo and Delta states, in the country’s South-South region. Drawing on our 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 the past year. Most take the extremely dangerous Mediterranean route, where death, injury, sexual violence, and imprisonment are common. The International Office for Migration (IOM) estimates that as many as 100,000 Nigerian migrants are currently stranded in Libyan prisons awaiting repatriation.

1 It is difficult to provide good estimates of irregular migration flows, but see Mberu and Pongou (2010); Afolayan (2009). 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).

2 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), even though the Middle East and in particular Syria have experienced extraordinary violence in recent years.
At the same time, destination countries in Europe, including Germany, which has been relatively welcoming to refugees from Syria and elsewhere, have made it extremely difficult for sub-Saharan African migrants to take up legal residence and employment. They have also recognized that even under a restrictive policy regime with routine enforcement action, return flows do not come close to equaling inflows, and have recently begun to fund a wide variety of campaigns in origin countries aimed at pre-journey potential migrants.

Many of these campaigns focus on providing information about the risks and costs of irregular migration and the supposed lack of benefits upon arrival in the destination country. Figure 1 shows several recent examples (from top to bottom): Danish newspaper advertisements published in Lebanon in 2015, which are perhaps the best-known example 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, also from 2015; and an ongoing web-based presentation (also initiated in 2015) called “Telling the Real Story,” which emphasizes the dangers of the irregular migration journey, and is coordinated by UNHCR’s Europe Bureau with funding from the European Union.4

Yet despite the fact that information campaigns are widespread, they are rarely preceded or accompanied by an assessment of what it is potential migrants actually believe about the journey and destinations in Europe and elsewhere. A reasonably accurate understanding of individuals’ state of migration-related knowledge and beliefs seems a natural starting point in designing an appropriate set of information interventions. We provide detailed evidence in this vein here, drawn from a survey we conducted in Benin City in October and November 2018.

We begin in Section 2 by explaining why Edo state and in particular Benin City are

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3 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?”

4 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 rigorous impact evaluation. See also Pécou (2010).
- وجود شروط تتعلق باللغة والقدرة على التواصل فيهماً وكلاهما لغة الدنماركية.
- إمكانية الحصول على تصريح بالإقامة الدائمة في الدنمارك.
- بواسطة إجراءات خاصة وسريعة إعطاء جواب الرفض عندما يعتبر طلب اللجوء بأنه غير مبرر ولا يستند إلى أسباب ذات صلة.
- كافة الذين يرفض طلباتهم للجوء، سيتم ترحيلهم من الدنمارك بسرع وقت.
- وجود مركز خاص يعين بترحيل كل من يرفض طلب لجوءه، من أجل ضمان ترحيل كل من يقدم طلب لجوء ورفض طلبه من البلد بسرع وقت.

Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing

The Danish Immigration Service

TELLING THE REAL STORY
Connect with other Eritrean and Somali refugees and asylum seekers who have made the perilous journey to Europe. Share your story with a community of fellow survivors.

Figure 1: Examples of existing information campaigns
compelling research sites for this project. Section 3 then presents insights from a survey we conducted in Benin City in October and November 2018. [Additional discussion of literature and conclusion to be added.]

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 that traverses the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea by way of Niger and Libya, a horrific undertaking.\(^5\) Figure 2 shows that Nigerians make up a major share of contemporary migration flows across the Mediterranean Sea. They were by far the single largest national group arriving from West or North Africa in Spain and Italy in 2016 and 2017 and have filed far and away the most asylum applications in Europe since 2011. European migrant stocks, shown in Figure 3, paint a similar picture. In 2017, approximately 400,000 Nigerians live in the EU, Norway, or Switzerland, 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 is currently engaged in assisting in 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). From January to September 2017, 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

\(^5\)See for example Ben Taub’s 2017 *New Yorker* feature, 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: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/10/the-desperate-journey-of-a-trafficked-girl
Figure 2: Irregular migration from Africa to Europe (U.S. Department of State, with data from Eurostat, IOM, UNHCR)

Figure 3: Migrant stocks in EEA in 2017 (Pew, based on UN data)
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. The survey’s sample of Nigerians is small at 65 individuals, but half came from Edo state, as shown in Figure 4. 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 and Employment is located; Lagos, the country’s largest city by far and its commercial center; and Benin City.

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6Despite 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.
Figure 5: Typical migration route from Benin City (Taub, 2017)
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). Over time, trafficking networks became entrenched, and traffickers have continued to benefit from economies of scale. As we describe in detail 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 migrant returnees who had attempted the Mediterranean route and a survey in October and November of 2018 with a representative sample of 548 households in Benin City, Nigeria’s central hub for irregular migration. For sampling purposes, we geolocated all approximately 156,000 residential building structures in the Benin City metropolitan area (shown in Figure 6); grouped them in 102 neighborhoods (in Figure 7, including a small number of hatched units excluded for security reasons), of which we randomly sampled 35; 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. Figure 8 shows building density (from the least dense areas in dark green to the most dense in dark red), with black dots marking our sample locations.

Enumerators completed household rosters, which allow us to capture in- and out-migration,

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7 Still today, some claim that more than 90% of Nigerian sex workers in Europe hail from Edo state (UNODC, 2009; Nwaubani and Guilbert, 2016, 2017).
8 We are also, separately, assisting the UK Cabinet Office to evaluate an anti-trafficking campaign in Edo and Delta states.
Figure 6: Buildings in Benin City

Figure 7: Neighborhoods in Benin City
Figure 8: Neighborhood density and sample locations

and an in-depth questionnaire with a household member aged 18–34, the age range within which individuals are particularly likely to migrate irregularly. We report the file status for all sample locations in supplementary table S.1. About 12% of contacted households 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.

We first show 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 the migration journey and destination countries. 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 features of
the migration journey. Third, subjects are much more optimistic about their own ability to migrate successfully than they are about others’ chances, suggesting motivated reasoning.

**Migration rates** Our survey data is consistent with previous reports about Benin City as a migration hotspot. The (unweighted) proportion of households with someone who left to “follow land” (migrate irregularly along the Mediterranean route) in past 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, 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 and Gallup, which show similarly high rates of interest among Nigerians in living abroad.\(^9\) 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”).\(^10\) None voiced expectations in line with the “rumors about Germany” that the German government has campaigned to dispel (for example, “Germany grants a house to every refugee”).

We see similar patterns in our survey data. Figure 9 shows histograms of the responses

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\(^{9}\)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.

\(^{10}\)Interview with “Precious” (age 24). Note that she and other interviewed returnees never reached Europe, but got stuck in Libya, in the case of Precious from 2015 until her return in 2018.
to four incentivized knowledge items. Vertical dashed lines mark the correct figures. In the first panel, we see that respondents actually underestimate monthly European per capita income. Their guesses concerning the life expectancy in Europe, seen in the second panel, are roughly centered on the correct response. The two panels on the bottom of Figure 9 show guesses of average monthly unemployment benefits, for the UK and Italy respectively. 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. 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.

Figures 10 and 11 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 means of the distributions differ statistically significantly in all four cases. 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 those who are not interested in irregular migration. Still, 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).

The histograms in Figures 10 and 11 are shaded to reflect responses on companion items

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11 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.
12 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?”
13 “What is the life expectancy in Europe? How old will a person get to be in Europe on average?”
14 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?”
15 Interest in irregular migration does not correlate with improved accuracy. Only for the income measure does it improve on average.
Figure 9: Beliefs about Europe
Figure 10: Beliefs about Europe among those interested in irregular migration

Figure 11: Beliefs about Europe among those not interested in irregular migration
in which subjects were 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.\textsuperscript{16} We will return to this issue again below.

**Risks of the journey** Many of our survey respondents believe there are significant risks associated with the journey. Figure 12 shows subjects’ guesses of the percentage of irregular migrants that suffer injury, death, sexual abuse, and slavery, respectively.\textsuperscript{17} The graphs do suggest community-wide uncertainty: Spikes at the midrange focal point of 50 are apparent in all four histograms. This could perhaps suggest poorly informed respondents, especially in conjunction with the fact that the graphs are otherwise relatively flat and show support across the full domain.

As before, we show separate histograms in Figures 13 and 14 for those interested in “following land” and those who are not. On average those interested in irregular migration believe “abduction, kidnapping, slavery” happens more frequently than those not interested in irregular migration. However, the biggest difference concerns estimated death rates, where the guesses of potential irregular migrants 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.

The histograms suggest four observations. First, they indicate that many individuals are aware of the horrific nature of the route across the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea. Death, injury, and abuse are pervasive on the route, as far as subjects are concerned, and average subject-estimated rates exceed the (highly uncertain) rates reported in academic and policy reports. Second, the salience of 50 as a focal point response and high levels of between-subject variation imply substantial uncertainty within the community about just

\textsuperscript{16}Those interested in irregular migration express greater certainty on average, but for the most part not significantly so.

\textsuperscript{17}“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.”
Figure 12: Beliefs about the journey
Figure 13: Beliefs about the journey among potential migrants

Figure 14: Beliefs about the journey among potential non-migrants
how harrowing the journey is. Third, this does not mean that subjects themselves say they are uncertain. In fact, self-reported uncertainty is significantly lower than it was for questions concerning life in Europe. The more lightly shaded a bar, the more uncertain subjects reported being about the underlying survey responses, and if we compare Figures 10 and 11 to Figures 13 and 14, subjects clearly feel they know more about the risks of the migration route than the destination. Fourth, subjects report being more sure the worse the scenario they envision. This is true also for the subsample of those interested in migrating irregularly. In other words, it is not the case that those potential irregular migrants who believe the risks of the journey are high express particularly high levels of uncertainty (which, in combination with a willingness to accept risk, could help explain their reported interest in the journey). Instead these subjects are interested in migrating irregularly even though they are quite sure most people experience extraordinary pain and suffering along the route.

Where does this leave information campaigns? On average neither individuals’ beliefs about life in Europe nor those about the Mediterranean route are unrealistically optimistic. In fact, they are too negative in some instances, which means blanket, non-deceptive information provision could perhaps even encourage migration. However, a different picture emerges in two areas discussed below. First, many respondents appear to know little about the actual mechanics of the irregular migration journey. Second, they seem extremely optimistic about their own chances of making it to Europe, despite their beliefs about the risks of the journey shown above.

Knowledge about features of the journey First, Figure 15 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.\(^{18}\) 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

\(^{18}\)“When you think about people leaving Nigeria to follow land to Europe, how do most of them cross into Niger?”
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.\(^\text{19}\) Enumerators had to enter these responses in an open text field after selecting “other.”\(^\text{20}\)

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.\(^\text{21}\) 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 16, 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),\(^\text{22}\) 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 even greater risk in an already perilous attempt at crossing the water.\(^\text{23}\) 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, potential migrants are in a difficult position to distinguish between true and false risks.

\(^{19}\)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 through this part of the country.

\(^{20}\)This suggests that this unusual response pattern is not the result of fatigue or inattentiveness.

\(^{21}\)“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?”

\(^{22}\)“Do you think the following is true: There are vampires that roam the water to Europe.”

\(^{23}\)“Do you think the following is true: There are sea pirates that steal the engines of boats trying to cross the water to Europe.”
Figure 15: Knowledge about the journey
Figure 16: Actual and imagined threats
Motivated reasoning 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 17 shows that four in five respondents believe it is “somewhat” or “very likely” that they would be able to go to Europe.\(^{24}\) Nearly the same share of respondents think that their asylum claim would be successful.\(^{25}\) 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.\(^{26}\)

\(^{24}\)“How likely do you think it is that you would be able to go yonder all the way to Europe, if you wanted to?”

\(^{25}\)“If you applied for asylum in Europe, how likely do you think it is that your claim would be accepted?”

\(^{26}\)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 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.
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). 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 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). The modal individual difference between the two (plausibly the expected cost of relocation and displacement) is precisely zero. 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. This calls 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.

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27 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?”

28 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.

29 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 30 other questions.

30 Figure S.1 in the supplementary materials shows survey results that suggest life in Benin City is indeed characterized by low trust, routine violence and altercations, and interactions with a predatory state.

31 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
Local norms about irregular migration Given how many people have already migrated in the past 15 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 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.”

Perceived norms are remarkably pro-migration. Most respondents think that

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32When 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.
Figure 19: Beliefs about community norms
there is little to no shame in trying to migrate irregularly.
References


Myths of Misinformed Migrants?

— Supplementary materials —
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Table S.1: File status for all survey sample locations
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 (significant mean differences in red)
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