

As the social integration of immigrants and their children becomes an increasing policy concern, a growing number of OECD countries have launched specific surveys to measure social integration outcomes. These surveys tend to cover issues that often rely on subjective judgements and are difficult to quantify, thus presenting considerable measurement challenges. Against this background, the OECD, together with the Austrian Federal Chancellery, have convened experts from different countries and organisations to share good practices and improve data collection on social integration outcomes.

*This **Migration Data Brief** summarises the key findings of the joint OECD-Federal Chancellery Roundtable on Measuring the Social Integration of Immigrants, held at the Federal Chancellery in Vienna in late 2023.*

What can we learn from surveys on the social integration of immigrants?

Background

The social integration of immigrants and their children is receiving increasing policy attention and constitutes a key part of integration programmes in many OECD countries. While there is broad consensus about its importance, its actual meaning is difficult to gauge. Social integration generally refers to non-economic aspects of integration such as identity and sense of belonging, discrimination, intergroup interactions, attitudes and values, and civic participation.

These issues are rarely covered in mainstream surveys used to construct indicators, such as labour force or living conditions surveys (see OECD/European Commission 2023). To identify and measure social integration, a growing number of OECD countries conduct targeted surveys, which vary widely in their design and the topics covered (see Annex Table 1 for an overview). As social integration indicators often rely on subjective assessments, feelings and perceptions, they are subject to several biases, which countries address in different ways.

To facilitate the exchange of good practices in the design and use of social integration surveys, the OECD, together with the Austrian Federal Chancellery, organised a joint roundtable with technical experts from 11 OECD countries as well as survey managers of key cross-country surveys. Participants discussed experiences, lessons learned, and challenges in terms of sample sizes and target groups, key issues covered and the use of social integration data in policy making. This Data Brief presents the main takeaways from the discussions and of the surveys presented and discussed at this occasion.

Key takeaways

Ensure representativeness

Social integration surveys often focus on specific migrant groups rather than aiming at representativeness of the entire migrant population. Countries target the most important origin groups of migrants in the country or measure the integration of vulnerable groups such as refugees or groups of interest not identified in other surveys, such as native-born people with foreign-born grandparents.

Some migrant groups are difficult to reach due to high residential mobility, lack of registration and/or undocumented status, lower levels of institutional and social trust, survey fatigue, and cultural and language barriers. This particularly concerns the low-educated.

Specific challenges arise for native-born with foreign-born grandparents, who cannot easily be identified in censuses or population registers. In the Trajectories and Origins 2 (TeO2) survey, France requested referrals and phone numbers of children from individuals with foreign-born parents to identify those with foreign-born grandparents. In contrast, the Muslim Life in Germany survey used an onomastic method, based on names and naming patterns, to contact individuals from predominantly Muslim countries of origin and their descendants.

Countries have also made targeted efforts to increase response rates among migrants in their social integration surveys, which are typically well below 50%, and in some cases even below 20%. Common techniques include an increased number of questionnaire translations, cultural training for enumerators,

streamlined questionnaires, reminders and follow-ups through different modes, and financial rewards. For example, the EU Survey on Immigrants and Descendants by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) was translated into 17 languages. For its IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, Germany provided audio files in addition to written translations so that illiterate respondents could participate.

Address ethical concerns, sensitivities, and stereotypes

In addition to adhering to standard ethical principles in survey research such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, social integration surveys require additional care to maintain ethical integrity as they deal with sensitive issues and often include vulnerable target populations.

Asking sensitive questions can raise ethical concerns and must be carefully planned to avoid offending, causing emotional distress, or re-traumatising participants. Community consultations with relevant target groups can help identify key issues and sensitive questions. Moreover, pre-testing is essential, not only to ensure the validity and reliability of survey questions, but also to correct or remove questions that may cause distress. In the German IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, social scientists with a background in psychology conducted qualitative interviews with recently arrived refugees and identified sensitive issues that were removed from the questionnaire (Kühne et al. 2019). If researchers decide to keep sensitive questions, these should always be optional.

Beyond the survey design itself, several countries have made efforts to select interviewers with migration experience, or of the same gender or ethnic group as the interviewee, to help ensure empathy and sensitivity during the interview.

Attention should also be paid to understanding how research can exacerbate prejudice, xenophobia and racism (Clark-Kazak 2019). Researchers should be aware that repeating biased opinions or stereotypes in the survey questionnaire can perpetuate them and offend respondents. In addition, questions and response options need to be carefully worded so that respondents do not inadvertently buy into stereotypes. Asking respondents to agree or disagree with a stereotype (e.g. people from region X are Y) can be misleading, for instance, as no simple answer option exists to reject the premise of such generalisations.

Finally, researchers need to be careful about how they analyse and present results to avoid misinterpretation and misuse. Relying too strongly on nationality, ethnicity, or religion as the explanatory factor for outcomes risks overlooking other underlying factors while reinforcing negative stereotypes. Education,

reason for migration, or other socio-demographic factors can have greater explanatory power than nationality (or ethnicity/religion), and it avoids stigmatising people of specific origins. Moreover, correlations between certain background characteristics and integration outcomes should be interpreted with caution, as they do not necessarily imply a causal relationship. Besides compositional effects, other mechanisms could be at play influencing certain outcomes. Therefore, results always need to be contextualised. For example, findings that indicate low levels of participation in voluntary organisations among certain migrant communities do not necessarily indicate a lack of social engagement. Rather, this may be due to language barriers, knowledge gaps or the prevalence of informal forms of social participation.

Be precise when capturing abstract concepts

Unlike economic integration, social integration often involves measuring dimensions that are abstract in nature and not easily quantifiable. For example, measuring attitudes to democracy, social interactions, trust and experiences of discrimination (see Box can be challenging because these are context-dependent, encompass multiple aspects and lack a universally agreed upon definition. In addition, rather than revealing their true preferences, people may try to conform their answers to social norms, a phenomenon known as social desirability bias.

Providing precise definitions for sensitive or abstract terms can significantly improve the quality of responses by limiting the scope for different interpretations. For example, interpretations of the term 'contact', which is often used in questions measuring the frequency of intergroup interactions, can range from a simple greeting to an extended conversation to a visit. The term should therefore always be preceded by a definition. In the case of the Austrian Migration & Integration survey, contact is defined as "*conversations, lasting at least 10 minutes, or joint activities.*"

As subtle nuances in language can have a significant impact on respondents' answers when measuring social integration, it is crucial to carefully test the validity of translations. The Netherlands, for example, tests translations with respondents of different origins and socioeconomic backgrounds for its Survey Integration Migrants (SIM).

Another way to avoid different interpretations is to ask about specific aspects of multi-faceted concepts. Democracy, for example, is a complex and contested concept that can be interpreted in different ways. While for some it means primarily the opportunity to participate in the political process, others might first think of political control in accordance with the rule of

law. Therefore, answers to questions that focus on a specific dimension of democracy are more revealing than views on democracy in general. The 2020/21

rotating module on democracy of the European Social Survey (ESS) includes a comprehensive set of such targeted questions.

Box. How can one measure experiences of discrimination in social integration surveys?

If designed carefully, survey questions about discrimination experiences can be a good indicator of self-perceived inequalities, exclusion, and social cohesion. Recognizing the difficulty in measuring such experiences, the European Commission guidance note on the collection and use of equality data based on racial or ethnic origin provides important insights (European Commission, 2022):

- Questions on experiences of discrimination should be preceded by a definition of discrimination to ensure that respondents have a consistent understanding of the term. In its 2022 EU Survey on Immigrants and Descendants, the FRA defines discrimination as a situation “*when somebody is treated unfavourably compared with others because of their skin colour, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, ethnic origin, religion or religious beliefs.*”
- Rather than asking a broad question about discrimination, surveys should ask separately about discrimination in specific areas of life. This increases the likelihood that respondents will recall all relevant incidents of discrimination, rather than focusing only on work- or education-related situations. In addition, it can help design more targeted anti-discrimination policies. The survey by the FRA collects data on experiences of discrimination in the following areas: when looking for a job, at work, when using health services, when trying to rent or buy an apartment or a house, in education, and when using public or private services (administrative offices, entering a nightclub, etc.).
- Discrimination can occur on several grounds, including gender, age, or ethnic identity. Ideally, respondents should be given multiple response options to identify possible grounds of discrimination. These should be considered in combination to identify multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. If covering multiple grounds is beyond the scope of the survey, the survey should at least clearly state the specific form of discrimination it is trying to measure, to avoid possible misinterpretation. The French TeO2 survey includes a comprehensive list with following grounds in its questionnaire: age, sex, health or disability, skin colour, origin or nationality, place of residence or neighbourhood reputation, accent or way of speaking, family situation, sexual orientation, religion, way of dressing and weight.
- If the length of the survey allows, respondents should be asked about experiences of discrimination in at least two different time periods. Even if policymakers are primarily interested in short-term discriminatory incidents, this approach tends to increase the reliability and validity of the data by encouraging respondents to differentiate discriminatory incidents at various stages.

Finally, asking about concrete situations helps respondents understand the nature of the questions and thus tends to provide more accurate answers. For example, respondents may find it difficult to report the number of friends or acquaintances they have, especially if these terms are not clearly defined in the questionnaire. It is more straightforward to indicate the number of friends the respondent has met at home or gone out with in the last two weeks, for example, in line with the approach in the French TeO2. In addition, respondents may be more inclined to express views that deviate from societal norms when asked about personal circumstances rather than broader social issues. Indeed, data from the 2022 Flemish Living Together in Diversity (SID) survey shows a significantly higher level of support for same-sex marriage in society as a whole compared to respondents' acceptance of a same-sex partner for their own children. Such variations in preferences in

different situations can also help to nuance the strength of prejudice.

Include the host-country population as a benchmark

Most surveys include a sample of the host-country population. This is crucial for establishing a benchmark for integration. Common indicators of social integration, such as attitudes towards gender equality and trust, are strongly influenced by host-country specific factors, with often greater differences between countries than between immigrants and the native-born within those countries (OECD/European Commission 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to observe immigrants' outcomes not just in absolute terms, but relative to the comparable native-born population. For example, data from the ESS show that although less than half of immigrants in the EU trust their host country's

parliament and legal system, immigrants have higher levels of trust than the native-born (30% versus 20% for parliament and 45% versus 33% for the legal system) (OECD/European Commission 2023). This suggests that low levels of institutional trust may be a societal problem, rather than an immigrant-specific issue.

Analysing the gap between immigrants and the native-born provides especially valuable insights when relevant compositional factors are also considered. For example, immigrants with low levels of education are more likely to be members of a voluntary organisation across the EU than their native-born counterparts, while the opposite is true for those with high levels of education (OECD/European Commission 2023).

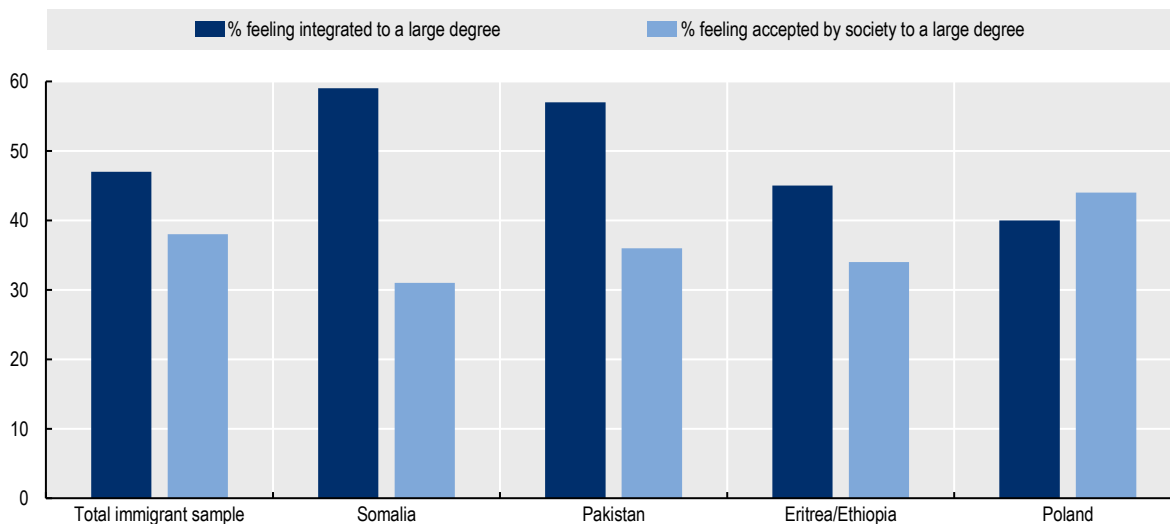
Model integration as a two-way process

Monitoring attitudes and behaviours of the host society can help identify factors beyond the control of migrants that facilitate or hinder their integration. Most countries view integration as a two-way process that requires efforts from both migrants and the host society. Against this background, questions directed towards the host society, or immigrants regarding their perceived acceptance, can provide valuable insights into patterns of social inclusion or exclusion. Discriminatory

behaviours and biased attitudes can hamper access to housing, employment and occupational advancement, among other aspects of integration (see Esses 2021 for a review). While there are often strong links between immigrants' levels of integration and their acceptance by the host society, these do not necessarily go hand in hand. Data from a Norwegian pilot survey conducted in 2022, for example, show large differences between immigrants' feelings of integration and their perceived acceptance by the host society across migrant groups. Among immigrants from Somalia and Pakistan, for example, less than 40% feel accepted by society, while the self-assessed level of integration is much higher (see Figure 1).

Most social integration surveys include questions on the social networks of the native-born, as both the rate at which they form friendships with each other and with migrants seem to affect integration outcomes (Bailey et al. 2022). Research suggests that immigrants' friendships or acquaintanceships with native-born are associated with better economic outcomes, higher levels of identification with the host society, increased use of the host language and greater acceptance among the native-born (see Drouhot and Nee 2019 for a review).

Figure 1. Share of immigrants feeling integrated and accepted to a large degree in Norway, by origin country



Source: Dalen, K., Flatø, H., & Friberg, J. H. (2022). Everyday integration. A pilot survey on experiences of trust, belonging, participation and discrimination in the Norwegian immigrant population. Fafo-report 2022:15. Oslo: Fafo.

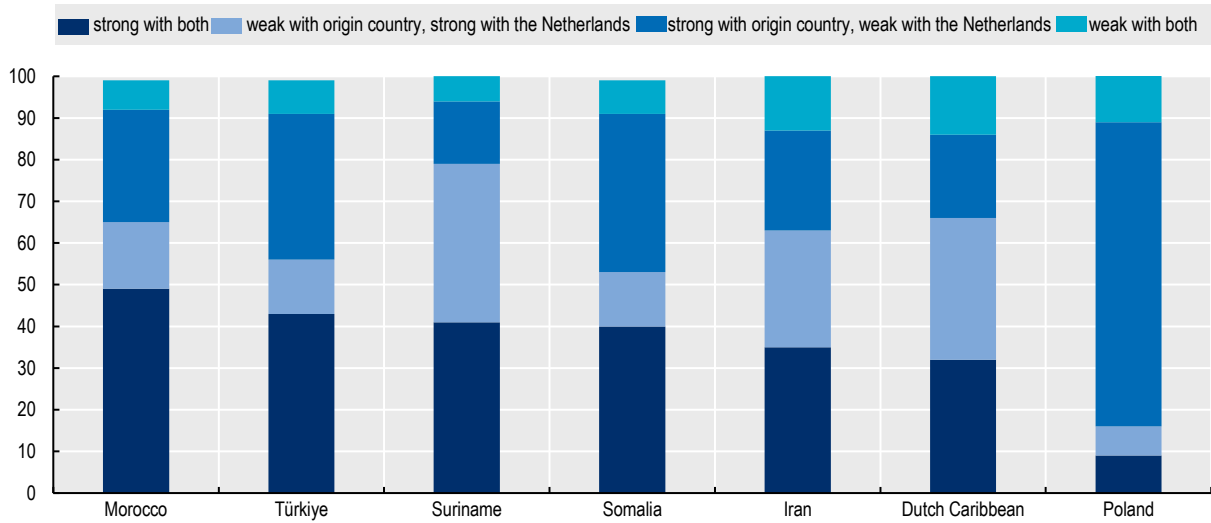
Consider overlapping socio-cultural identities

The question of identity is often of significant interest to policymakers. A key finding in this respect is that strong identification with the origin country does not prevent a strong attachment to the host country. In the Dutch SIM, for example, a large share of immigrants identify strongly with both the Netherlands and their country of

origin, with variations depending on the country of origin (see Figure 2). In addition, measures of social inclusion in this survey include relationships with the native-born population, co-ethnic ties and interactions with other immigrant groups. Research suggests that co-ethnic ties can be helpful to the integration of migrants, especially on arrival (e.g. Martén et al. 2019). In addition to job search assistance and other practical support,

these connections can provide a sense of familiarity in a foreign environment and social and emotional support (de Guzman and Garcia 2018).

Figure 2. Identification of immigrants and their children with origin country and the Netherlands, by origin country group



Source: de Boom, J., van Leeuwen, R., Sam, N., Seidler, Y., van Wensveen, P. (2023). *Ontwikkeling in integratie: De maatschappelijke positie van zeven groepen met een migratieachtergrond in kaart gebracht.*

Account for inter- and intra-dimensional linkages

Exploring inter- and intra-dimensional linkages between different indicators provides valuable insights into the integration process. Immigrants may excel in one domain while lagging behind in another (e.g. strong social ties but limited civic participation). Some aspects of integration may simply take more time than others, or may be building on one another (e.g. with social ties leading to employment, or vice versa). Moreover, some immigrant groups may be better placed to quickly integrate in one aspect (e.g. cultural integration for immigrants with former colonial ties) than in another (e.g. economic integration).

Several countries use such evidence to inform policymaking. Data from the Flemish SID survey show a positive correlation between frequent contact with people of Belgian origin and various indicators of integration (e.g. language learning, sense of belonging). Recognising the importance of social networks, the Flemish government introduced a 'buddy system' in its civic integration programme, linking people of Belgian parentage with newly-arrived migrants.

While it is relatively easy to establish correlations between indicators, uncovering causal relationships usually requires more rigorous investigation and testing. However, some countries directly link social and economic integration indicators in their questionnaire to explore these links. For example, the Flemish SID survey

asks whether respondents found their current job through co-ethnic or majority social ties among other options.

Find the right balance to monitor changes over time

Although social integration surveys can be costly, conducting them regularly is essential to assess progress over time and identify areas for improvement or adjustment. However, unlike labour market outcomes, which fluctuate with the business cycle, social integration outcomes tend to be less volatile. Against this background, countries need to determine the right frequency of monitoring outcomes to track changes over time while minimising costs and possible survey fatigue among respondents.

The intervals at which countries hold their social integration surveys vary considerably. Large-scale surveys, such as the French TeO survey, are carried out only once or twice a decade, while the frequency of surveys with shorter questionnaires and/or online survey modes is usually much higher. To strike a balance between the need for frequent updates and an in-depth analysis of social integration outcomes, Belgium (Flanders) has combined both approaches: It conducts a short annual online survey on social integration outcomes (Living Together Barometer) and a more in-depth face-to-face survey every five years (Living Together in Diversity, SID).

As many outcomes of social integration tend to be stable over time, changes are only visible in the long term. For example, the annual Danish National Integration Barometer shows limited fluctuation for several outcomes (e.g. political participation, perceived discrimination). The same can be seen regarding the host-country perception of the presence of migrants, which has remained relatively stable in most countries over the last decade, despite significant changes in the migration landscape (OECD/European Commission 2023).

However, significant policy changes, the ongoing public debate and highly mediated events close to the survey can sometimes lead to significant shifts in social integration outcomes even in a short period of time. Panel data from the United States show that while perceptions of discrimination against black Americans remained relatively constant between 2016 and 2020, they rose sharply between February and October 2020, coinciding with the start of the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests (Mutz 2022).

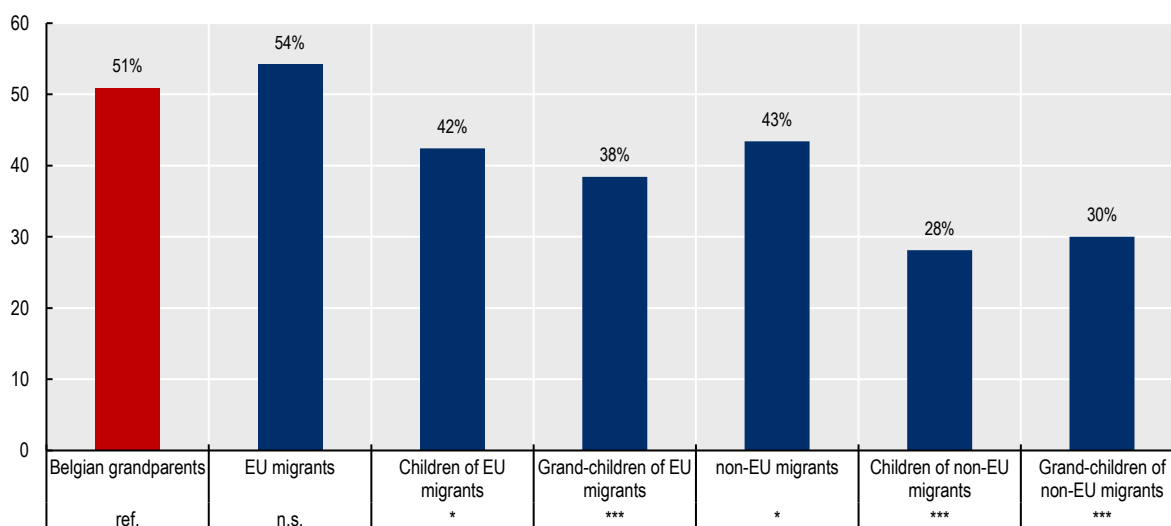
Measure progress across generations

Monitoring social integration across generations provides valuable insights into integration dynamics. While social (and economic) integration outcomes generally show marked improvement across generations (OECD/European Commission 2023),

integration trajectories are not always straightforward. Descendants of immigrants may face specific challenges, such as navigating multiple identities related to their parental origin or discrimination. Therefore, an increasing number of countries now collect data on the native-born children of migrants and, as in France and Belgium (Flanders), even on their grandchildren.

Survey results comparing the social integration of different generations underscore the intricate nature of the integration process. Attitudes, values, and civic engagement tend to converge with those of the native-born, just like economic outcomes. Moreover, mixed marriages between immigrants and native-born weaken the direct link with migration across generations. For example, the French TeO2 survey shows that the majority of native-born grandchildren of immigrants have only one immigrant grandparent. However, descendants of immigrants often exhibit a weaker sense of belonging, lower levels of trust, and a higher likelihood of perceiving discrimination than their immigrant parents. For instance, trust in others is significantly lower among children and grandchildren of immigrants in Belgium (Flanders) (see Figure 3), and native-born children of migrants in the Netherlands are less inclined to view the country as open and equal than those who have migrated themselves. These findings may be driven by heightened expectations of fair and equal treatment and a deeper understanding of discrimination processes.

Figure 3. Share of people who think most people can be trusted, 18-85 years old, 2023, Belgium (Flanders)



Source: Bewerking ABB, survey Barometer Samenleven 2023.

Note: Weighted figures. Significance levels: ref. reference group; n.s. not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Conclusions

Social integration is an increasingly important policy area and many countries have implemented surveys to analyse outcomes and monitor progress. As these surveys often cover vulnerable populations and deal with sensitive issues, they require careful planning to ensure representativeness and to address ethical concerns and sensitivities.

Social integration is the area where the concept of integration as a two-way process is perhaps most evident. It implies that integration requires both efforts from migrants to adapt to the new environment as well as acceptance and equal treatment from the host community. The measurement of attitudes and behaviour in the host

society is crucial in this respect, both as a benchmark and, in some areas, as a determinant of integration outcomes. Furthermore, clear definitions for abstract concepts and specific questions can help measure facets of social integration that are not easily quantifiable.

Ongoing improvements in data collection regarding social integration provide a rich opportunity to gain insights into the complex dynamics of integration trajectories. Several surveys have been conducted multiple times by now, and often include data on both migrants and their descendants. This enables a clearer understanding of the factors that facilitate or impede progress in this field, both over time and across generations.

Annex: List of selected surveys measuring the social integration of immigrants

Country/ Institution	Survey name	Year (latest available)	Link
Australia	Mapping social cohesion	2022	Mapping Social Cohesion 2022
Austria	Migration & Integration (Migration & Integration)	2023	Migrationserhebung
Belgium (Flanders)	Living Together in Diversity (Samenleven in Diversiteit, SID)	2022	Samenleven in Diversiteit
Belgium (Flanders)	Living Together Barometer (Barometer Samenleven)	2022	Barometer samenleven
Denmark	Citizenship Survey (Medborgerskabsundersøgelsen)	2023	Integration Barometer
France	Trajectories and Origin 2 (Trajectoires et Origines 2, TeO2)	2019/2020	Trajectoires et Origines 2
Germany	Muslim Life in Germany (Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland, MID)	2020	Muslim life in Germany
Germany	IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees	2023	iab-bamf-soep-befragung-gefluechtete
Netherlands	Survey Integration Migrants (Survey Integratie Migranten, SIM)	2020	Survey integratie migranten
Norway	Quality of Life in Norway (Livskvalitet)	2022	Quality of Life in Norway
Sweden	Swedish Immigrant Value Survey (SIVS)	2022	The social values of newly arrived immigrants
Switzerland	Survey on diversity and coexistence (Vivre ensemble en Suisse, VeS)	2022	Diversity and coexistence
European Social Survey (ESS)	European Social Survey (ESS)	2020-2022	European Social Survey
Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)	EU survey on immigrants and descendants of immigrants	2022	EU survey on immigrants and descendants of immigrants
International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)	FIMAS survey (6 waves)	2022-2023	COVID-19 pandemic and labour market integration of refugees

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Useful links

<https://www.oecd.org/migration/>