

Illegal Immigration Of Africans Through Algeria: Between The Choice Of Stability And The Dream Of Crossing To Europe

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Abstract:

Illegal immigration has become the predominant form of migration from African countries to the European Union. Maghreb countries, including Algeria, have recorded high rates of illegal immigration of their citizens to Europe over the past two decades, especially among young people. and given their geographical proximity to Europe, have at the same time become a transit point for illegal immigrants arriving from neighboring African countries and, in many cases, a center for transit and even settlement and concentration.

In this paper, we attempt to provide a sociological field approach to illegal migration from African Sahel countries transiting through Algeria by describing the socio-demographic variables of a sample of African migrants residing in the province of Ghardaia, as well as the reasons for their migration from their countries of origin and the motives behind it.

Keywords: illegal immigration, Algeria, African Sahel, African migrants, Europe, motives for migration.

1. Introduction

North African countries, especially the Maghreb countries, are witnessing - an increase in illegal immigration, in addition to a growing influx of illegal migrants arriving from African Sahel countries in order to transit to European Union countries, especially

those that traditionally attract migrants from North Africa and Africa in general, such as France, Spain, and Italy. The Maghreb countries have recorded high rates of illegal migration of their citizens to Europe over the past two decades, especially among young people. and given their geographical proximity to Europe, have at the same time become a transit point for illegal immigrants arriving from neighboring African countries and, in many cases, a center for transit and even settlement.

The ambition of this category of migrants is mainly to reach Europe via the Maghreb countries in search of better opportunities to improve their living conditions through migration and integration into social spaces other than their countries of origin. However, with the gradual closure of the European Union's borders to curb migration and the border control measures taken by transit countries since 2000, a number of African migrants are forced to settle in these countries for longer periods in order to work and save enough money to secure the next step in their migration project. This, in turn, has contributed to changing the position of the Maghreb countries towards migration, transforming them from mere centers of migration to European countries into transit centers and areas of settlement and concentration for African migrants.

Algeria is one of the Maghreb countries that attracts the most African migrants due to its geographical location close to Europe on the north and its southern borders with the African Sahel countries. In 2010, Algeria recorded the entry of more than 90,000 migrants, including 10,000 illegal migrants, 138 refugees, and 192 asylum seekers. This figure refers to migrants from sub-Saharan Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia) (Veronique Planes-Bousac et al.,2010, p.15).

Recent figures from the Algerian Ministry of Defense reveal that 29,587 illegal immigrants of various nationalities were arrested across the country in 2024, while in 2023, the same ministry recorded 14,814

arrests, meaning that the number doubled in 2024 (Abdelhafidh Sajal, 2025).

In this context, this paper aims to review the findings of a field study conducted in February 2025 in the city of Ghardaia, located in southeastern Algeria, which serves as a link between the south and the north and a transit point for large numbers of African migrants. The study included a sample of 36 African migrants of different nationalities. Our aim is to identify the factors that allow us to better understand why illegal migration is a “life project” for this category of migrants. We will also attempt to review the factors that have turned Algeria into a transit point for migrants and even a place of settlement. This will be done by asking the following questions:

- ✓ Who are the illegal African migrants?
- ✓ Why do they migrate from their countries of origin? What are their motives?
- ✓ Is Algeria really just a transit hub for this category of migrants? Or is it a place where they settle?

2. Illegal immigration.. Definition of the concept

The term “immigration” generally refers to the movement of people in which an individual or group moves from their country of origin to a new country of their choice for various reasons.

There are several types of migration, including “legal migration,” in which migrants enter their destination country in compliance with all immigration laws of the host country.

Illegal, clandestine, or irregular migration, by whatever name it is called, is migration that takes place through human smuggling gangs and the trade in forged passports. It is a global phenomenon that is widespread in all countries of the world and usually takes place toward developed countries, such as the United States and the European Union.

Illegal immigration has several definitions due to its multiple aspects and different objectives. Researchers Jordan and Düvell define it as “crossing a border without official permission or violating the conditions of entry into another country”(Hein de Haas, 2008, p.13).

It is also defined as “the migration of foreign nationals to a country in circumstances where they do not meet the legal requirements for residence in that country” (Ahmed Ismail, 2012, p.66).

The concept of illegal immigration encompasses all of the above, extending to what is known as “Harga”, which refers to "an individual or group burning all documents or proof of identity linking them to their home country with the intention of belonging to their destination country, this constitutes a complete violation of the laws and customs governing movement between countries"(Khatou Faiza, 2011, p.35).

An “illegal immigrant” is defined as “a foreigner who enters a country other than his own without the permission of its government, or who remains there after his entry visa has expired”(Ahmed Ismail, 2012, p.66).

3. Areas of study

3. 1. Geographical area

The field study was conducted in the province of Ghardaia, specifically in the municipality of Ghardaia, located in southeastern Algeria, 600 km from Algiers.

3. 2. Human domain

The human domain consists of illegal African immigrants of various nationalities residing in the municipality of Ghardaia.

3.3. Temporal domain

This study was conducted between February 5, 2025, and February 17, 2025.

4. Methodological procedures of the study

4.1. Study method

Given the precision required in scientific research, it was necessary to present the method used in this study in order to arrive at results that answer the questions posed. The most appropriate method for our study is the descriptive method, which is based on a detailed and accurate description of a specific phenomenon or topic in a specific period of time. This approach was chosen as the most appropriate for addressing the subject of the study.

4.2. Research community

The research community on which our field study was conducted consists of illegal African immigrants of various nationalities residing in the municipality of Ghardaia.

4.3. Sample

In this study, we relied on the available sample, also known as the incidental or purposive sample, as researchers often find themselves forced to work with available samples due to the lack of sufficient information and statistics on the research community or due to limited time and financial resources.

The available sample was adopted from those we had access to, namely illegal African immigrants of various nationalities residing in the commune of Ghardaia, with a total of 36 illegal African immigrants.

4.4. Data collection tools

Given the nature of the research community, we relied on structured interviews with the research subjects in our study.

5. Socio-demographic characteristics of illegal African immigrants in Algeria

These characteristics include: age, marital status, nationality, educational level, and professional activity of respondents prior to migration.

5.1. Age and marital status

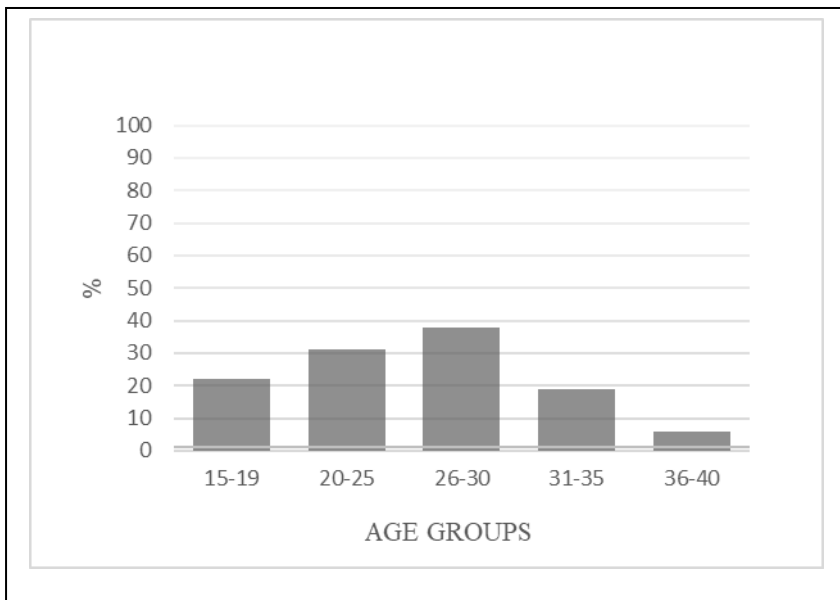


Fig 1: Distribution of African migrants by age group

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on SPSS outputs

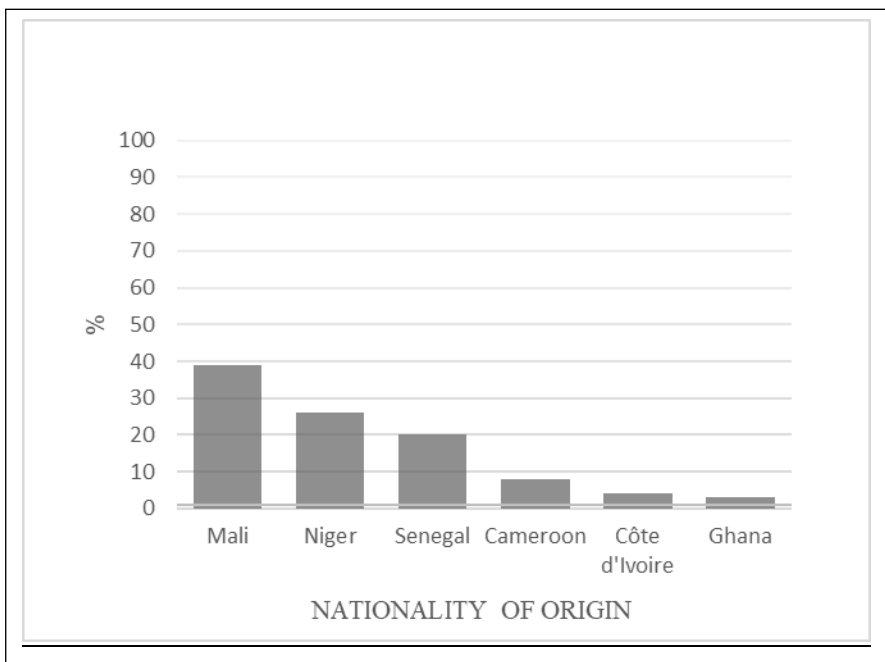
Young people under the age of 35 constitute the majority, accounting for an estimated 94% of the study sample, while those aged between 36 and 40 account for only 6%. Furthermore, 88% of the study sample are single, while 12% are married (including those accompanied by their wives and children).

The high percentage of young people among illegal African immigrants is mainly due to their strong ambition and desire to achieve their immigration goals, which is reinforced by their spirit of

adventure and desire to improve their deteriorating living conditions in their African countries, in the hope of starting a better life in another society. Conversely, the low percentage of migrants over the age of 35 is due to the difficulty of illegal migration and the need for good health and physical abilities to withstand the risks and harsh conditions of travel.

5.2. Nationality of origin

Fig 2: Distribution of African immigrants by Nationality of origin



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on SPSS outputs

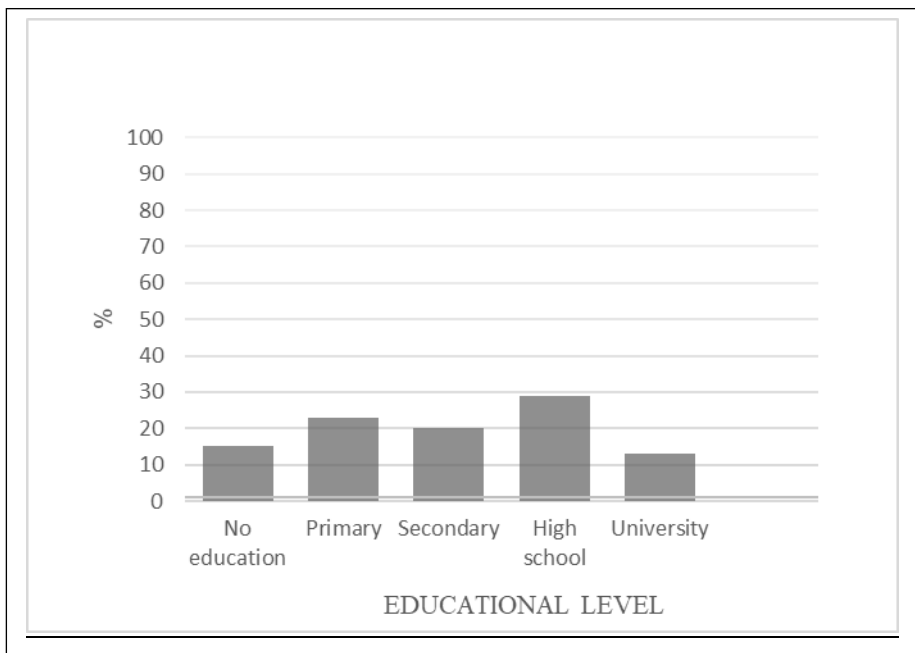
Migrants of Malian nationality constitute 39% of the study sample, followed by 26% of Nigerian nationality and 20% of Senegalese nationality, while migrants of Cameroonian, Ivorian, and Ghanaian nationality constitute 15% of the sample.

It should be noted that the majority of the study sample (72%), especially Malians, do not have identity documents. which some attribute to not having them even before leaving their countries of origin, while others say they were lost or stolen during their journey.

In other cases, some attribute this to confiscation by the authorities of one of the countries they crossed before reaching the Algerian border. Only a few admitted to having disposed of their documents to make it difficult to determine their identities and nationalities, which helps them escape or evade immediate and rapid repatriation to their countries by the authorities of the receiving countries.

5.3. Educational level

Fig 3: Distribution of African immigrants by educational level



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on SPSS outputs

Our fieldwork with the sample group for this study somewhat refuted the prevailing image of illegal African immigrants. Those who were previously mostly illiterate or generally had a low level of education have become more educated. Forty-nine percent of the study sample had a secondary or intermediate level of education, 23% had a primary level of education, 15% had no education, and 13% had a university degree.

The high percentage of educated immigrants is mainly due to the fact that the most educated and trained immigrants have higher aspirations in terms of work, income, and living conditions, which drives them to seek other opportunities to achieve these aspirations outside their countries of origin, where the conditions to realize them are not available.

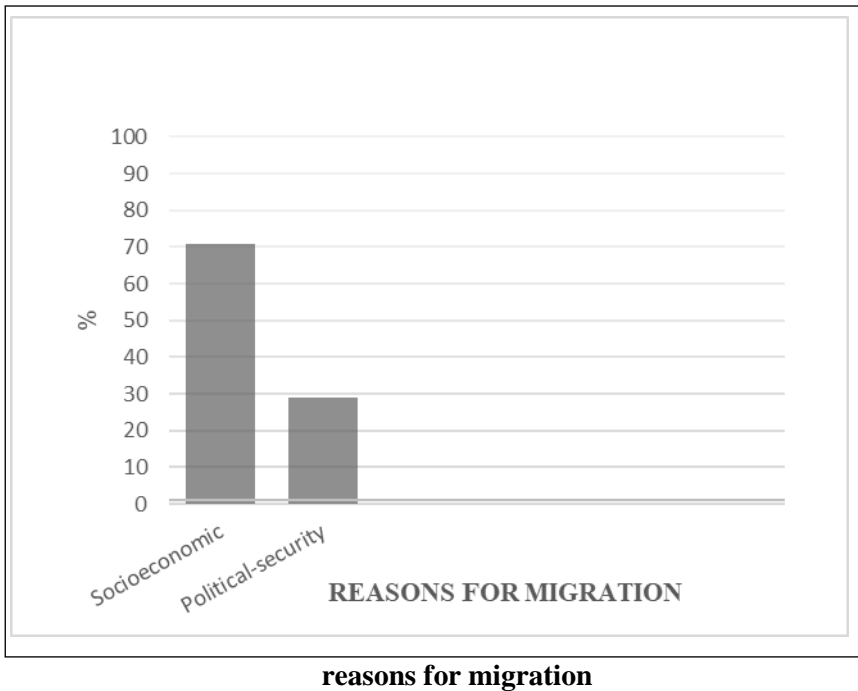
5.4. Original professional activity prior to migration

Field data indicate that 39% of the African migrants studied were unemployed before leaving their countries, and 24% stated that they did not have a stable job. Those who were engaged in trade and crafts are estimated at 20%, while those who were engaged in other occupations such as agriculture and construction represent 17%.

These data clearly reflect the importance of work for individuals. If working individuals consider low income to be a sufficient justification for emigrating in order to increase their income, then the unemployed consider it to be more than sufficient justification. Therefore, unemployment is considered one of the main reasons for emigrating abroad in search of work.

6. Reasons and motives for African migration

Illegal migration by African migrants is the result of a combination of economic factors (material insecurity, increasing poverty, demographic growth, etc.) and political factors (ethnic conflicts and civil wars, etc.). and regulatory factors (mandatory visas, the Schengen Area, etc.) (Hein de Haas, 2008, p.13). Migration in general cannot be a random and spontaneous adventure, but is often the result of pressure exerted by these factors, either collectively or individually, which forces individuals to migrate from their countries to other regions.

Fig 4: Distribution of African migrants according to the nature of their

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on SPSS outputs

Through the sample of migrants studied (as shown in Figure 4), we observed a predominance of socio-economic and political-security factors, with 71% attributing their migration to economic reasons, while 29% stated that it was due to security reasons.

6.1. Deteriorating economic conditions and increasing poverty

The economic situation in African countries is putting increasing pressure on the populations of these countries, which are experiencing high demographic growth and increasing poverty more than anywhere else in the world, with “more than half of the African continent's population spending US\$1 or less per day”(Ahmed Ismail, 2012, p.70). This, in turn, has contributed to an increase in the number of famines in many countries on the continent. The countries of the African Sahel are the most affected, with “186 million people

suffering from chronic malnutrition, representing 34% of the region's total population”(Ahmed Ismail, 2012, p.71).

These socio-economic conditions in Africa are the result of a dynamic of economic decline and regression in all dimensions of development. This is reinforced by the fact that 71% of the migrants surveyed cited the instability and deterioration of the economic situation in their countries as the main reason for leaving their homeland and embarking on the adventure of illegal migration. They attributed the main reason for leaving their homeland and embarking on the adventure of illegal migration to the lack of job opportunities and insufficient income to meet their basic needs and those of their families as a result of the deterioration of economic conditions in their countries.

These migrants embarked on the journey of illegal migration and accepted the risks in order to achieve their dream of social success or in search of the social status they had lost in their countries due to unemployment and poverty, accepting any job in their country of destination in order to achieve this. Socioeconomic factors strongly influence the decision to undertake risky migration in search of a better life.

6.2. Conflicts and civil wars

The reasons for security-related migration range from political and ethnic persecution to broader concerns related to the general context of the country or to wars and conflicts. Twenty-nine percent of the study sample attributed their migration to the tense security situation in their countries.

Available statistics indicate that “the countries of the African Sahel, which are home to more than 10% of the world's population, account for about half of the world's armed conflicts.” Many of these countries have suffered and continue to suffer from the consequences of political unrest, wars, ethnic conflicts, and ongoing military coups, such as Mali, Nigeria, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone.

The consequences of political instability and security breakdowns that characterize these countries are not limited to threatening social security and the safety of individuals, but go beyond that to something even worse. Civil wars and armed conflicts between countries contribute to the destruction of these countries' infrastructure and the depletion of their resources and wealth. They also disrupt local and foreign investment, thereby limiting opportunities for development that would meet the needs of the people of these countries in terms of education, health services, job creation, and the provision of basic infrastructure.

These political and security conditions overlap with the deteriorating economic conditions in these countries, further complicating and worsening the living conditions of their people. This is what drives a large segment of young people in the African Sahel countries to leave their countries in search of a better life, regardless of the dangers and costs, whether in North African countries or even outside the continent, specifically in European Union countries.

7. Algeria is a country of immigration, not just a transit point to Europe

Over the past two decades, the media and political discourse have promoted a bleak image of the mass and increasing exodus of Africans fleeing poverty and war in their home countries, crammed into “death boats” in an attempt to reach the “shores of dreams” in Europe. This period has also seen the introduction of strict regulatory measures, both in transit countries (North African countries) and in countries attracting African migrants (European Union countries). These measures aim to limit the flow of migrants and combat illegal immigration by strengthening border controls and taking decisive action against illegal migrants and the organized smuggling networks involved in this activity.

Despite the rapid increase in both legal and illegal migration from Africa to Europe, particularly since the 1990s, available field data indicate that illegal immigrants from African Sahel countries do not

represent North African countries, including Algeria, for the majority of them, but rather a “transit point” to Europe. Available statistics estimate that “the number of Africans from the African Sahel countries who enter the Maghreb countries by land ranges between 65,000 and 120,000 migrants, while only 20% to 30% of them manage to enter Europe”(Hein de Haas, 2008, p.9); with many of them ending up staying and settling in the Maghreb countries.

Furthermore, the results of a large-scale field survey conducted in Algeria in 2008 show that "the percentage of sub-Saharan Africans who wish to live in Algeria cannot be ignored, with 57% of them pursuing this project, while 43% of them aspire to travel to Europe or elsewhere (another Maghreb country, Canada, or Australia)"(Veronique Planes-Bousac et al.,2010, p.14). This initial reading indicates that Algeria has now become a country of immigration and not just a transit country to Europe. According to the study sample, this is due to two main reasons:

1- Some “transit migrants” end up working and settling in marginal cities or migration centers in desert regions (in Algeria, for example, these centers are located in the provinces of Tamanrasset, Adrar, Illizi, Ghardaïa, etc.) without even reaching the coastal cities of the Arab West (Mediterranean coast).

2- A significant proportion of African migrants who have failed in their attempt to enter European Union countries prefer to remain in North African countries as the second-best option for them, with only a few deciding to return to their countries of origin, which are less stable, less secure, and, above all, poorer.

Many Maghreb countries are receiving large and growing numbers of illegal immigrants and refugees from African Sahel countries. Despite the irregular status of this category of migrants and the tightening of internal regulatory measures by the Maghreb countries in dealing with them, a large number of them succeed in finding employment opportunities in specific fields, often in the informal sector (shoemakers, construction workshops, parallel trade, cleaning,

etc.)(Hein de Haas, 2008, p.11). In general, African migrants resort to doing some of the hard jobs that citizens of the Maghreb countries avoid.

5. Conclusion

Illegal migration among Africans has become a global phenomenon, driven primarily by adventurous African migrants and organized groups specializing in migrant smuggling on the one hand, and European Union countries and African countries from which migrants originate or through which they pass on the other. The particularity of this phenomenon lies in the fact that it is forced migration in response to desperate situations resulting from the absence of any economic or development prospects in African countries, especially for young people.

The development gap between rich and poor countries, especially in Africa, as well as conflicts, disputes, and civil wars, remain among the most important reasons driving large numbers of illegal African migrants to Western countries in search of a better life than the one they left behind in their homelands, regardless of the risks involved in illegal migration and the cost, which for many of them may be as high as their lives.

It is a phenomenon with multiple dimensions—developmental, strategic, and even ethical—that requires a positive approach to address its root causes and mitigate its effects, rather than relying on security measures, laws, and agreements that have proven to be insufficiently effective.

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