

50,000 LIVES LOST DURING MIGRATION:

Analysis of Missing Migrants Project
Data 2014–2022

The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the report do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries. IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

This publication has been issued without formal editing by the Publications unit of IOM.

CONTENT

Julia Black & Zoe Sigman, IOM GMDAC

LAYOUT DESIGN, DATA VISUALIZATION AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Roberta Aita, IOM GMDAC

Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Taubenstr. 20–22 D 10117 Berlin, Germany

Tel.: +49 30 278 778 22 Fax: +49 30 278 778 99

Please visit the GMDAC website for publications, resources, and events: <http://gmdac.iom.int>.

Suggested citation: Black, J. and Z. Sigman, 2022. 50,000 lives lost during migration: analysis of Missing Migrants Project data 2014–2022. IOM GMDAC

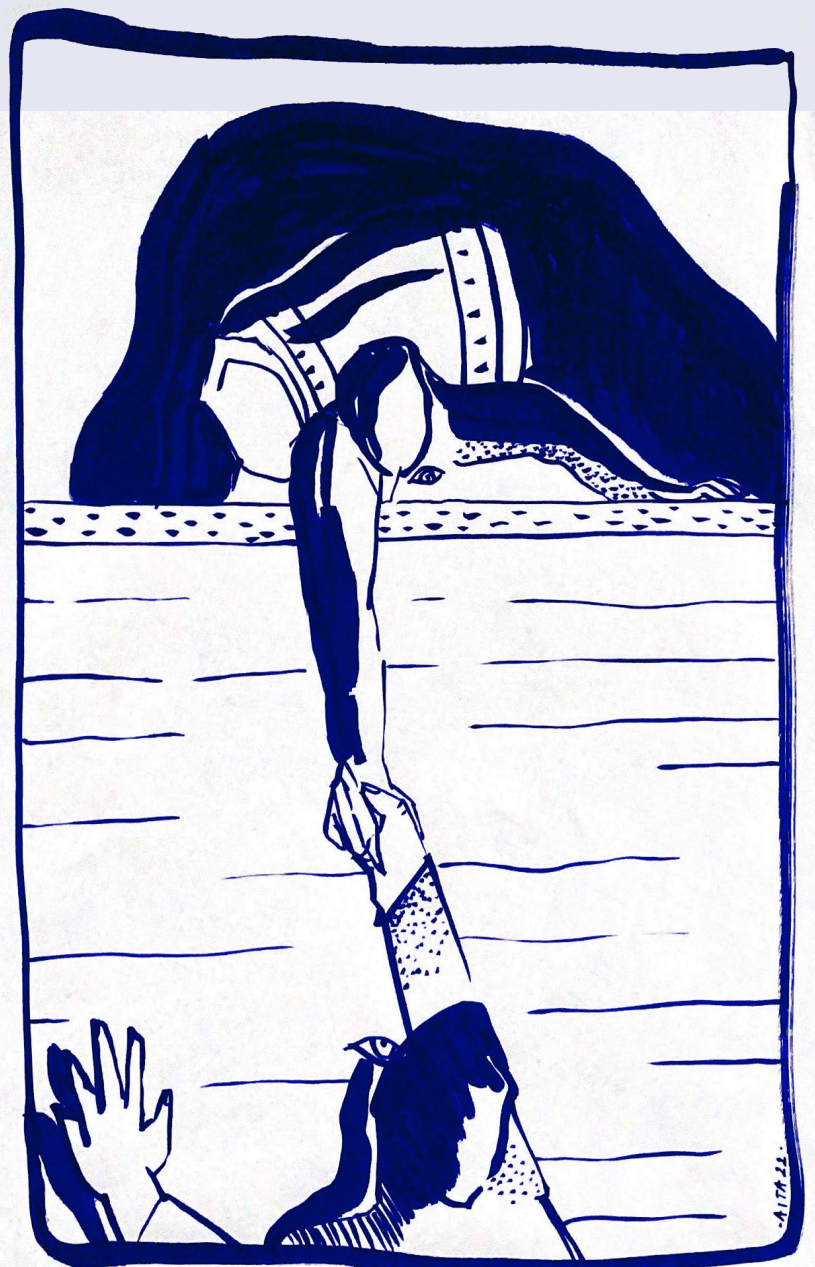
Since the Missing Migrants Project began documenting deaths in 2014, more than 50,000 people have lost their lives during migratory movements. More than half of these deaths (29,126) occurred on routes to and within Europe, including 25,104 in the Mediterranean Sea. While this haunting milestone is emblematic of the continuing crisis of unsafe migration worldwide, these deaths represent only a fraction of the true total: no state currently publishes figures on migrant deaths.

This briefing provides an overview of the regions and routes since 2014, highlighting the deadliest routes and the groups most at risk for dying while in transit. It concludes with a discussion of the Missing Migrants Project's methodology and steps that can be taken to ensure that those who undertake migratory journeys arrive safely at their intended destination. This briefing also includes annexes providing annual [breakdowns of data](#)¹ and [links to in-depth analysis](#) by region, route and year.

“

We are appalled by the deaths of these migrants who intended to cross the border to seek a better life based on their legitimate human rights... The tragedy could have been avoided if a comprehensive rights-based approach had been incorporated in border policies.”

– Statement by the UN Committee on Migrant Workers after 23 people were killed at the Morocco-Melilla border, 28 June 2022



¹ All data used in this briefing are from the Missing Migrants Project dataset, accessed 15 November 2022.



 x 500 people

At least
50,000 PEOPLE
DIED DURING MIGRATION SINCE 2014

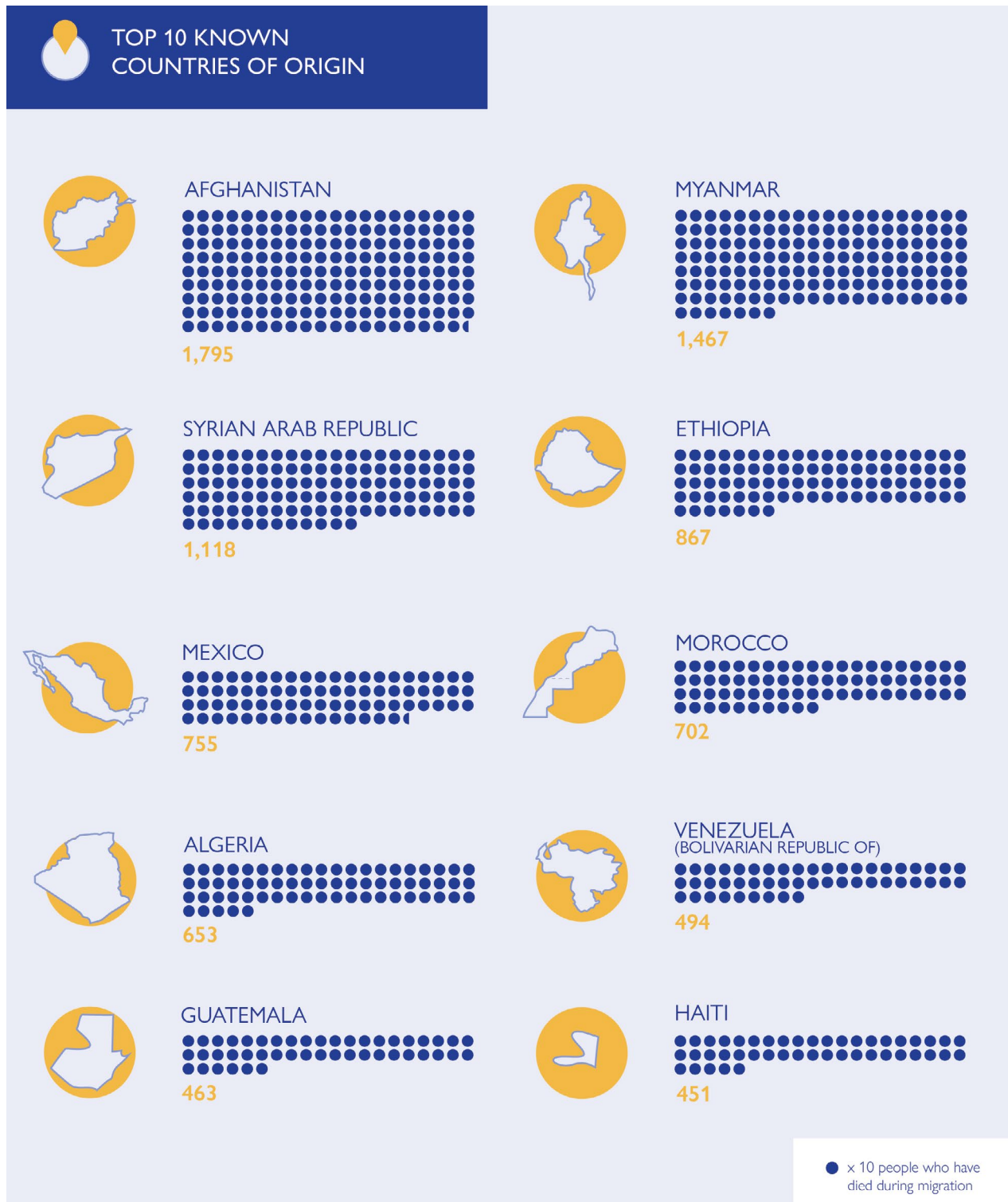
Data as of 15 November 2022



Main countries of origin of dead and missing migrants since 2014

Of the 51,194 individuals recorded in the Missing Migrants Project database since 2014, more than 30,000 people are listed with an unknown, unspecified or presumed nationality, indicating that more than 60 per cent of people who die on migratory routes remain unidentified. Of those whose country of origin was identified, more than 9,000 individuals were from African countries, with another 6,500 from Asian nations and more than 3,000 from the Americas. The figure below shows the top 10 known countries of origin of people who have died during migration since 2014.

Figure 1: Top 10 known countries of origin

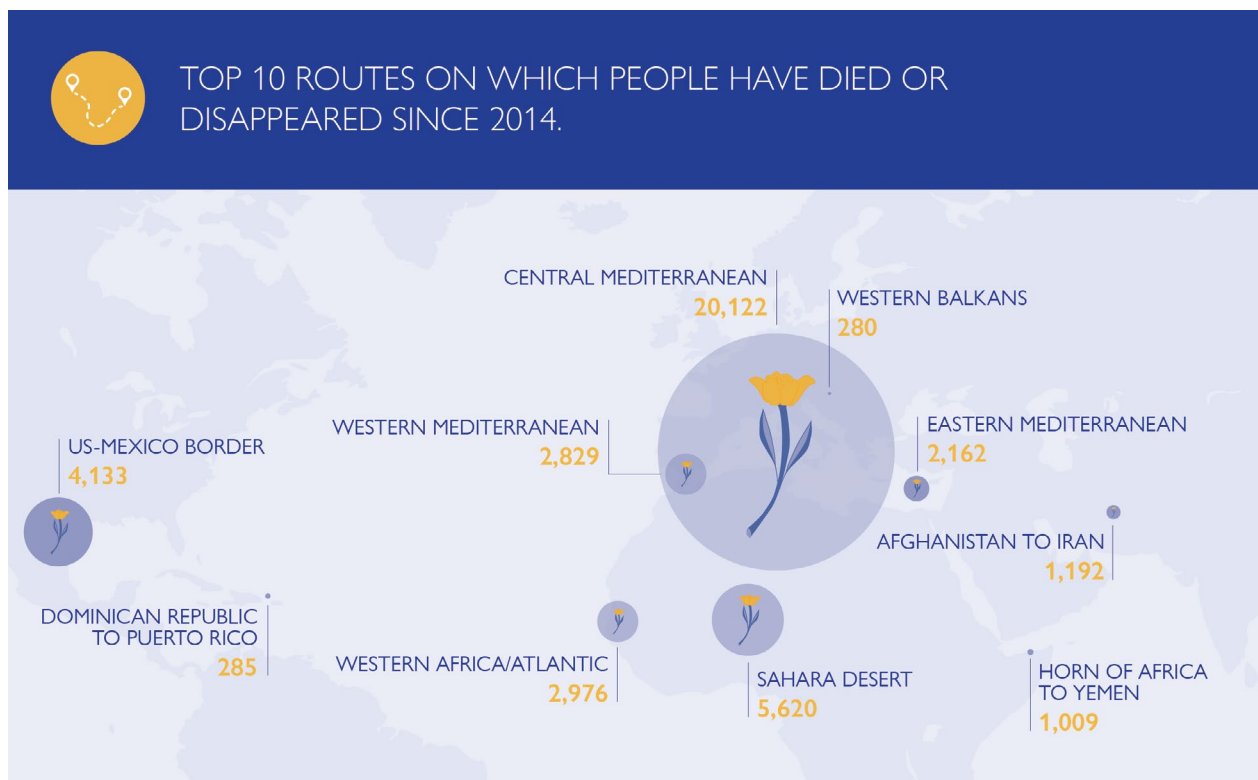


Source: Missing Migrants Project, 2022.

Main regions and routes of deaths during migration since 2014

More than 8,700 people have died or disappeared on unidentified migratory routes since 2014. This indicates that while there is a need for more resources to track migrant deaths on all routes, it is especially important to target areas that are under-resourced, as deaths are less likely to be documented in areas where the risks of migration are less well-known. The figure below shows the top 10 routes on which people have died or disappeared since 2014.

Figure 2: Top 10 routes on which people have died or disappeared since 2014



Source: Missing Migrants Project, 2022.

Deaths to and within Europe

More than half of the 50,000 deaths documented during migration since 2014 have occurred within or en route to Europe, with 29,126 deaths or disappearances recorded within Europe and at its external borders on sea routes in the Mediterranean and Atlantic, as well as at land borders such as the Greece-Türkiye border. This figure makes Europe the deadliest known migration destination. Of the dead and missing for whom some information is known, at least 1,024 children, 2,535 females and 3,728 males are known to have died during migration.

European routes comprise the largest number and proportion of people with unrecovered remains, with at least 16,032 people missing and presumed dead at sea on routes to and within Europe. Effectively, this means that at least 1 of every 2 individuals lost on European migration routes remains unrecovered and unidentified.

While the 25,104 deaths documented during Mediterranean Sea crossings remain the deadliest known overseas routes in all years in the Missing Migrants Project database, the increase in recent years is in large part due to the many deaths on the Western African-Atlantic Route (WAAR), a sea crossing taken primarily by West and North Africans attempting to reach Spain's Canary Islands. Nearly 1,600 deaths on the WAAR have been documented since 2021, more than half of the total 2,947 documented on this route. On all sea routes to Europe, 'invisible shipwrecks'—in which no search and rescue is conducted and no remains are ever recovered—are incredibly difficult to verify and as such the death toll for these routes is almost certainly an undercount.

Deaths at Europe's land borders are less widely publicized but nonetheless account for more than 1,000 lives lost. Lives lost on border crossings to the European Union account for more than half (534) of this total, including 280 in the Western Balkans and 254 at the Greece-Türkiye land border.



“

As time goes by, there is no news. We just want to know if he is alive or dead. We just want to know something.” - Moroccan migrant in Spain, on searching for his brother who disappeared 20 years ago en route to Europe.
IOM (2021) [Families of Missing Migrants: country report for Spain](#), p. 36

Deaths within Africa

More than 9,000 deaths have been documented within Africa, making it the second-deadliest known region for people on the move.¹ Migration across Africa is highly disparate as are the information sources on deaths during migration, meaning that this figure is extremely likely to be an undercount. For example, a household survey conducted by the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency in 2021 estimated that more than 51,000 Ethiopian nationals are missing migrants, 16.5 per cent of whom—an estimated 8,430 individuals—were known by their families to be dead.²

The deadliest known route within Africa is the Sahara Desert crossing, with 5,620 lives known to be lost since 2014, though qualitative research and widespread anecdotal reports indicate that far more people disappear in the desert than are currently recorded. For example, several studies indicate that people transiting the Sahara Desert often fall off the back of overloaded trucks—or are even thrown off for fear of spreading illness—and are left behind in extremely remote areas.³ Despite this, only 148 people missing and presumed dead during trans-Saharan migration have been confirmed by the Missing Migrants Project since 2014.



“

In the desert, when you fall down, they leave you. Sometimes, in the morning, some people would tell us that they couldn't get up anymore, they would tell us to continue the journey without them. And you can't do anything to help them. I knew that if it happened to me too, they would leave me.” – Aboubacar, a Guinean refugee interviewed in France by Infomigrants, 2021

¹ Note that this figure excludes deaths at sea on Mediterranean Sea crossings and the West African-Atlantic Route (WAAR) to Spain's Canary Islands, which are included in the section on routes to and within Europe above.

² Central Statistics Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia] 2021. Labour Force and Migration Survey Key Findings. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

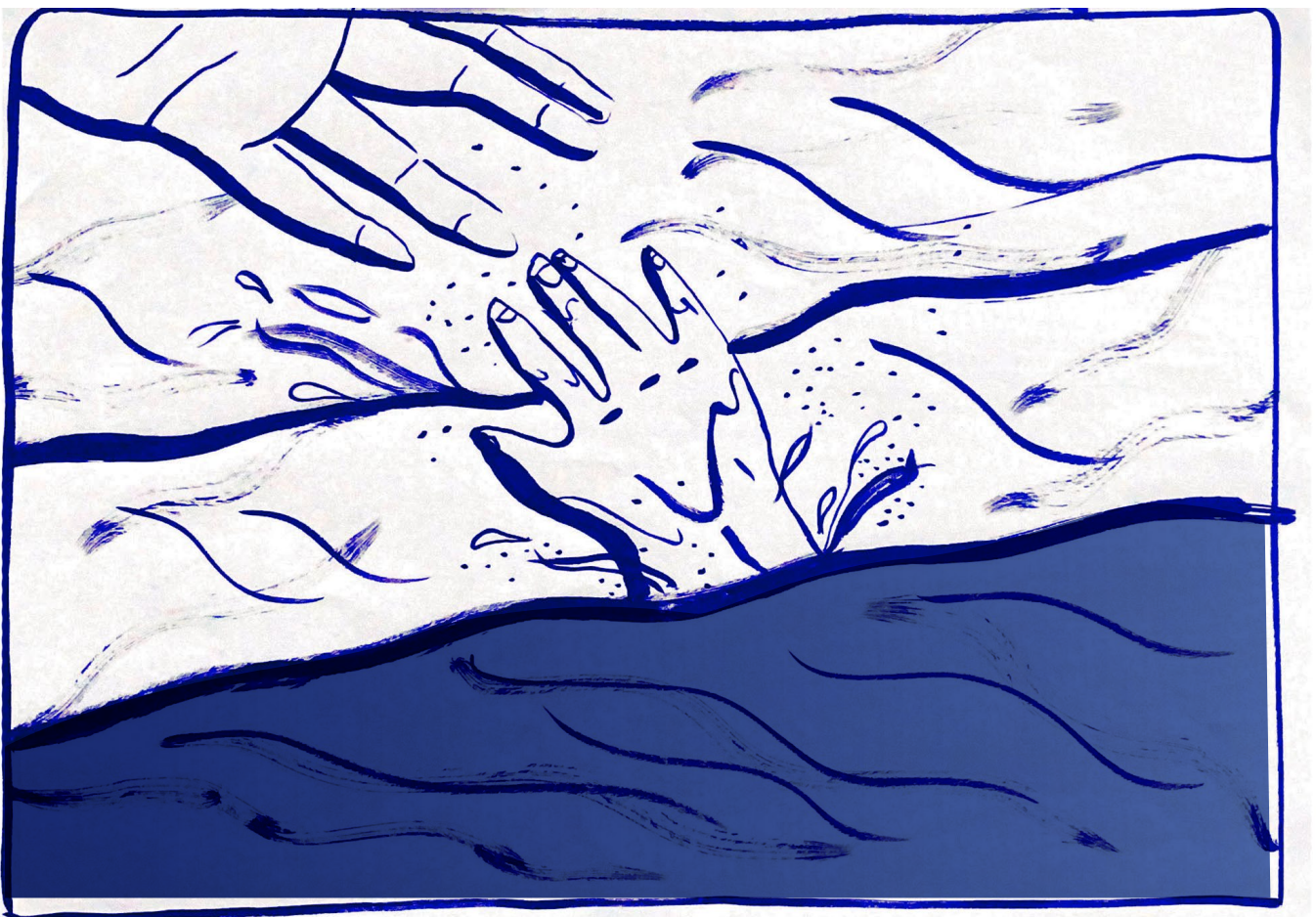
³ Médecins Sans Frontières (2017) Dying to Reach Europe: Eritreans in Search of Safety; Reitano & Tinti (2015). Available at www.msf.org/dying-reach-europe-insight-desperate-journeys-eritreans-make-reach-safety. Survive and advance: The economics of smuggling refugees and migrants into Europe; Micallef (2019). Available at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Reitano-Tinti-Survive-and-advance-the-criminal-economy-of-migrant-smuggling-Dec-2015.pdf>. The Human Conveyor Belt Broken: assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel. Available at https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Global-Initiative-Human-Conveyor-Belt-Broken_March-2019.pdf.

Deaths in the Americas

Across the Americas, more than 6,900 deaths during migration have been documented since 2014. Notably, more lives are known to be lost in the United States of America than in all other countries in the Americas combined—though is as reflective of the availability of data on missing migrants as the dangers of irregular routes to the United States. At least 4,694 lives have been lost on routes to the United States since 2014, including deaths at Mexico’s northernmost border and those who have died or disappeared on sea routes from the Caribbean to United States territories.

The United States-Mexico land border crossing has been the site of more than 4,100 deaths in total, including at least 114 children, 360 females and 2,349 males. More than half (2,114) of those whose deaths are documented in the Missing Migrants Project database died of unknown causes, often meaning that their remains were found weeks or months after their death occurred, which is typical in remote desert regions near the border. At least 902 people drowned attempting to cross the border, often in the Rio Grande, and another 608 lives were lost due to harsh environmental conditions and lack of adequate shelter. Vehicle accidents claimed the lives of another 285 people attempting to cross the United States-Mexico border, with another 113 lives lost due to violence during transit.

Deaths on other routes in the Americas may be as deadly as the United States-Mexico border but documenting these deaths is even more difficult given the lack of attention to less well-known routes. For example, Missing Migrants Project has documented 199 deaths in the Darien Gap, a multi-day crossing of the jungle at the border between Colombia and Panama that was transited by more than 100,000 people in 2021 alone.⁴ However, reports of people witnessing deaths or walking past bodies in this remote region are extremely widespread, but nearly impossible to document beyond sporadic eyewitness reports.



“

“I saw a child dragged down by the river, he just slipped out of his parents’ hands. I have seen dead people, drowned people: four of them. I smelled decaying corpses down in the ravines.” – Oscar, on the 14 days spent crossing the Darien Gap (*El Espectador*, 2021, own translation)

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations (2022) Crossing the Darien Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S.

Deaths in Asia

Since 2014, more than 6,200 deaths during migration have been documented in Asia, including Western Asia.⁵ More than 11 per cent of the lives lost on migratory routes in Asia are of children, the highest proportion of any region. Of the 717 deaths of children recorded during migration in the region, more than half (436) are of Rohingya refugees.

South-eastern Asia comprises the largest number of deaths during migration documented in any Asian subregion, more than 3,000 recorded, 1,359 of whom were Rohingya departing from Myanmar. Another 142 deaths of Rohingya on the move were documented in Southern Asia, a region where more than 1,800 lives have been lost in total during migration since 2014. More than three quarters of all deaths documented on migratory routes in Southern Asia are of Afghans, with at least 1,419 lives lost in total. In Western Asia, at least 1,315 lives have been lost on migratory routes since 2014, many of which occur in countries with ongoing violent conflicts. For example, since 2014 at least 522 people arriving from the Horn of Africa have died in Yemeni territory and at least 264 Syrians have died attempting to cross the border to Türkiye.



“

We had reached the wide street that divides Syria and [Türkiye], and the smuggler told the child and another man to cross it. They started to walk across, and then bang, bang. They were both shot. The kid, it went straight through his stomach, and he was bleeding heavily. We dragged him back with us all the way, and he died in Syria.”

– Syrian woman interviewed by [Human Rights Watch](#), 2018

⁵ Excludes Türkiye-Greece border crossings, which are discussed in the section on migration to and within Europe.

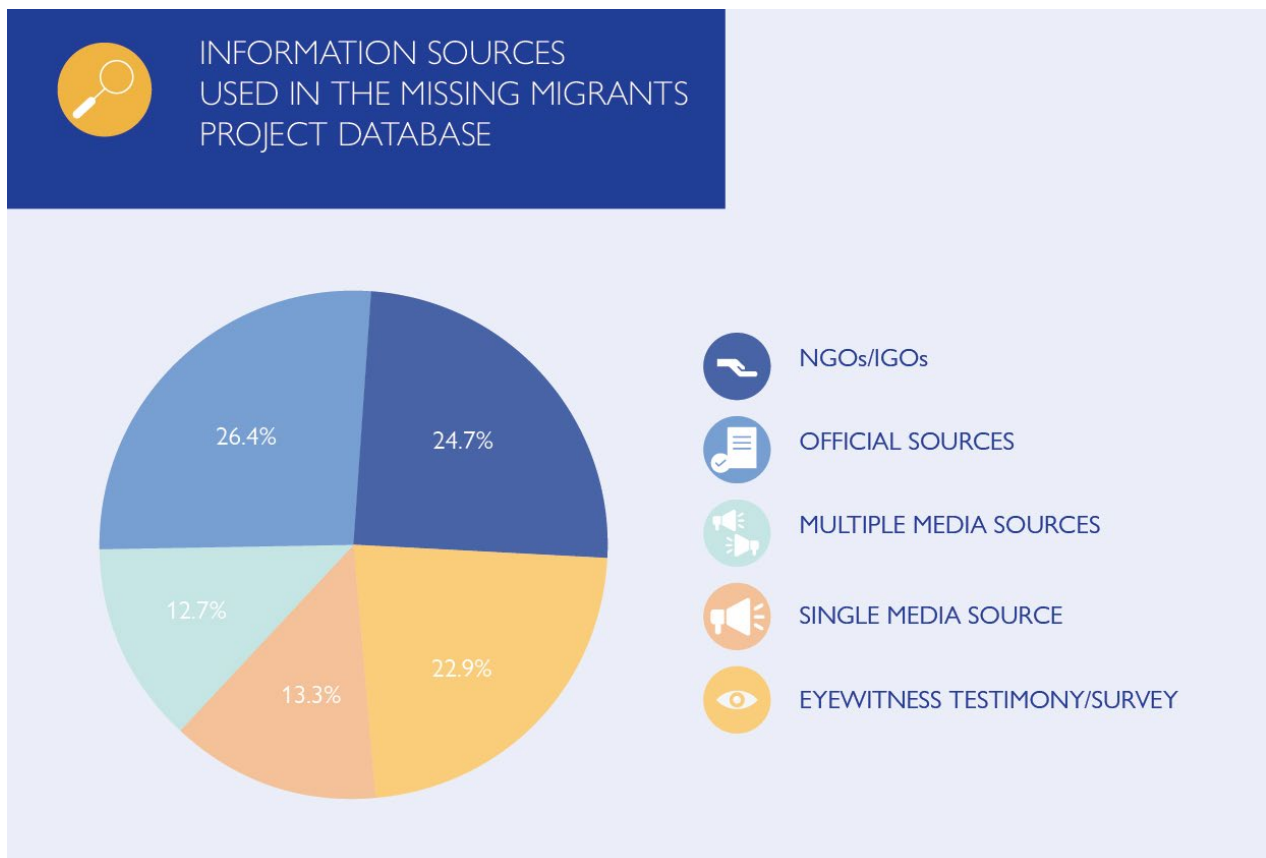
Across all subregions worldwide, migratory routes across Southern and Western Asia have the highest rates of death due to violence, with 23 per cent of all deaths recorded in both of these subregions. The violence leading to the deaths of 301 people on the move in Western Asia and 421 in Southern Asia is largely linked to heavily securitized borders proximate to ongoing conflicts. 340 deaths due to violence involved Afghans attempting to leave their home country since 2017, and another 208 were documented at the Syria-Türkiye border since 2014. As many of the most hazardous border crossings across the Asia region involve ongoing conflicts documenting these deaths is exceptionally difficult. At the same time the available Missing Migrants Project data are heavily biased toward crisis contexts, as evidenced by the relatively high availability of data on deaths of Rohingya and Afghan refugee movements

Methodology

IOM’s Missing Migrants Project relies on a variety of reports from local authorities, non-governmental organizations, eyewitness reports of migrant deaths, and media reports. This reliance on often-unofficial information means that the available data is biased heavily toward regions and routes the issue of migrant deaths is already well-known, such as the Mediterranean Sea and the United States-Mexico border. Nearly half of all records are based off reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) who work directly with people on the move or their families. In areas where authorities and NGOs are largely absent, data is also based on eyewitness testimonies from survivors of incidents involving deaths on migratory routes, often collected through surveys. Missing Migrants Project also conducts media monitoring in seven languages⁶ to document reports of deaths during migration from online social and news media.

While this approach is necessitated by the fact that no State currently produces data on deaths during migration, it does mean that many deaths and disappearances during migration remain undocumented, and that data quality and completeness is highly variable across different regions and routes.

Figure 3: Information sources used in the Missing Migrants Project database



⁶ English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Swahili, Thai and Wolof.

Conclusion

With more than 50,000 deaths during migration documented since 2014 there is clear evidence that existing policies do not ensure safe migration for all. Nearly 22,000 people are listed as missing and presumed dead in the Missing Migrants Project database, meaning they disappeared and no remains were recovered. Each of these individuals represent not just a human life, but a family and community impacted by an unresolved loss. Commitments to preventing further deaths and addressing the impacts of the loss of life already included in global agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Global Compact for Migration and many regional calls to action such as those from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights have yet to see substantive action.⁷ Similarly, recommendations on saving lives and addressing the impacts of these 50,000 deaths remain unaddressed by any government.⁸

The challenges linked to documenting missing migrants means that better data is needed. Yet the overwhelming albeit incomplete evidence shows that meaningful policy interventions are long overdue. States must uphold their commitments to safe migration by revising policies that lead to further deaths, and by creating new laws to save lives and ensure that the impacts of these deaths on families and communities are addressed.

More in-depth information about the different regions and routes discussed in this briefing is included in our annexes, where you can [read more](#) or [access summary data](#).

⁷ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2019) Recurring migrant deaths at sea, a grim reminder of need for solutions, available at <https://fra.europa.eu/it/news/2019/recurring-migrant-deaths-sea-grim-reminder-need-solutions-says-fra>; FRA (2013) Fundamental rights at Europe's southern sea borders, available at <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2013/fundamental-rights-europes-southern-sea-borders>; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2019) Inter-American Principles on the Human Rights of all Migrants Refugees, Stateless Persons and Victims of Human Trafficking, available at www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/pdf/Resolution-4-19-en.pdf; African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2021) Resolution on missing migrants and refugees in Africa and the impact on their families, available at www.achpr.org/sessions/resolutions?id=517.

⁸ See UN Network on Migration (2022) Act Now to Save Lives and Prevent Migrants From Going Missing.



GLOBAL DATA INSTITUTE
GLOBAL MIGRATION
DATA ANALYSIS CENTRE

