

**“IF NOT FOR PURE NECESSITY”**

**DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES ON  
MIGRATION JOURNEYS IN NORTH  
AND CENTRAL AMERICA**



The opinions expressed in the briefing 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 briefing 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 was made possible through support provided by U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), under Western Hemisphere Program. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States of America.

---

Publisher: International Organization for Migration  
Regional Office for North America, Central America and the Caribbean  
San Jose  
Costa Rica  
Tel: +(506) 2212-5300  
Email: [rosanjose@iom.int](mailto:rosanjose@iom.int)  
Website: [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int) This publication has been issued without formal editing by IOM.

This publication has not been officially edited by IOM.  
This publication was issued without IOM Publications Unit (PUB) approval.

Authors: Julia Black and Edwin Guillermo Viales Mora

Layout and Design: Letra Maya

Required citation: Black J. and E. Viales Mora, 2021. "If not for pure necessity" Deaths and disappearances on migration Journeys in North and Central America. IOM. San José, Costa Rica.

---

© IOM 2021



Some rights reserved. This work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 IGO License (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO).\*

For further specifications please see the Copyright and Terms of Use.



**“IF NOT FOR PURE NECESSITY”  
DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES ON MIGRATION  
JOURNEYS IN NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA**





# “IF NOT FOR PURE NECESSITY”

## DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES ON MIGRATION JOURNEYS IN NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

---

Julia Black and Edwin Guillermo Viales Mora<sup>1</sup>

More than 5,000 deaths and disappearances during migration across Central and North America and the Caribbean have been recorded since 2014, though many more likely go undocumented. This crisis of migrant deaths is well-publicized in some areas but poorly covered in others. This briefing provides an overview of data collected in/on the Americas<sup>2</sup> by IOM’s [Missing Migrants Project](#) (MMP), which since 2014 has documented deaths and disappearances during migration worldwide. This briefing begins with a discussion of the many challenges of documenting migrant deaths in the Americas, and the urgent need to collect better data on those who lose their lives while transiting in the region. Without robust data, effective policies and programmes aimed at promoting safe migration for all remain out of reach, and the information needed to provide closure to the countless families directly impacted by a relative’s disappearance remains missing.

The following sections of this briefing discuss the risks on routes across Central and North America, including the [United States of America-Mexico border crossings](#), routes through [Mexico](#), the [Darien Gap](#) and migration from and within the [Caribbean](#). It also includes an overview of the most recent trends in deaths on migration routes in these areas, based on data collected from January to July 2021 – though the COVID-19 pandemic has changed migration trends profoundly, migrant deaths continue to occur across the region.

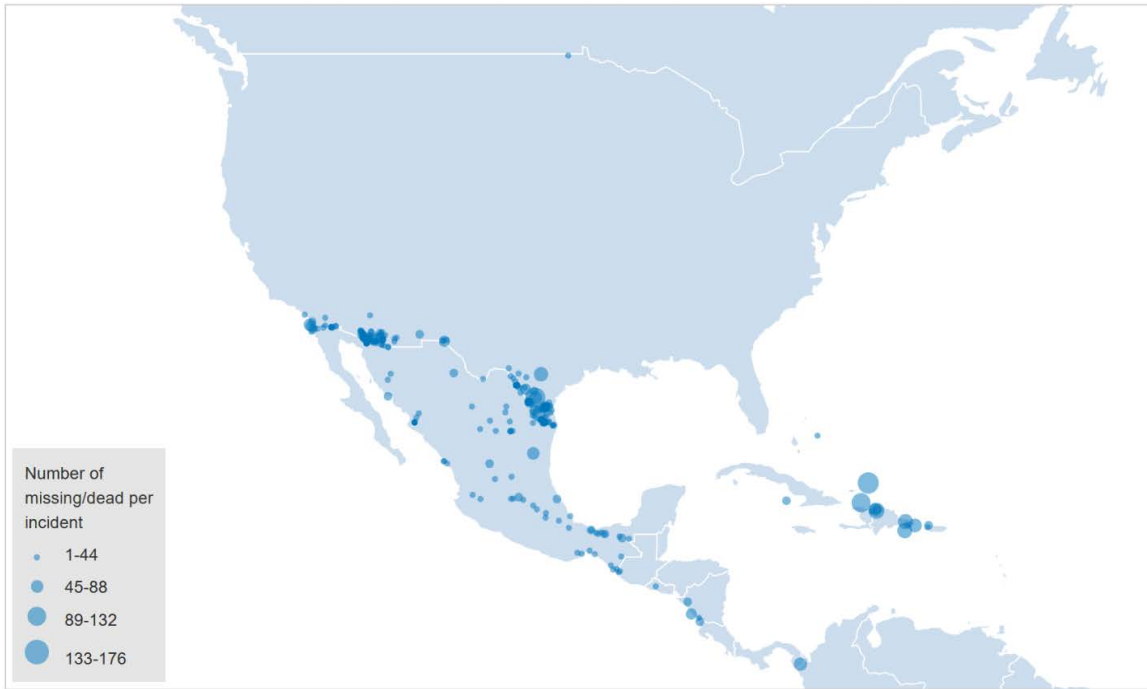
In order to contextualize and humanize this grim data, testimonies from affected migrants and their families, as well as best practices from the region on the issue of missing migrants are included throughout. The briefing concludes with a set of [recommendations](#) for governments and NGOs working on the issue of missing migrants in the Americas, including a call for safe, legal routes that are ultimately the only solution to the unnecessary loss of life on migratory routes across the region.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julia Black is a Project Officer at IOM’s Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) in Berlin, Germany where she supports the Missing Migrants Project and Strategy & Communications Unit. Edwin Guillermo Viales Mora is the Data and Research Assistant and Focal Point for the Missing Migrants Project at IOM’s Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean, based in San José, Costa Rica.

<sup>2</sup> Though migrant deaths are also an issue in South America, this briefing focuses on areas covered by IOM’s Western Hemisphere Program, i.e. Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

Map of migrant deaths recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project in North and Central America, including the Caribbean, 2014-2020



Source: IOM's Missing Migrants Project, 2021.

Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration. Data represent minimum estimates and locations are approximate.

## DATA METHODOLOGIES, CHALLENGES AND DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS BRIEFING

As discussed throughout this briefing, collecting data on deaths and disappearances on migration routes is challenging, not least because of the lack of official sources of information on fatalities during migration. Besides the United States of America-Mexico border, one of the few locations in the world where mortality data is regularly disaggregated by migratory status (see textbox 1), MMP data relies heavily on media sources to record migrant deaths in the Americas. However, media reports can be unreliable and/or incomplete, especially in terms of identifying the individuals who lost their lives during migration. In addition, journalists often do not have the resources necessary to fully investigate a death, and media coverage more broadly is chosen based on intangibles such as newsworthiness or topical policy discourses. The fact that more than 40 per cent of all incidents recorded by MMP in the Americas come from media sources indicates that the coverage and quality of data on migrant deaths across the region are highly incomplete.

Table 1: Sources of information for recorded incidents involving a death during migration, by type

	Media	NGO/IGO	Government	Total incidents	Total deaths
<b>US-Mexico border</b>	708	68	1,461	2,237	3,059
<b>Routes through Mexico</b>	353	10	7	370	650
<b>Darien Gap</b>	11	0	0	11	62
<b>Caribbean</b>	74	6	14	92	888


Source: MMP, 2021.

Note: All data from January 2014-July 2021. An 'incident' is a single fatality-inducing event or the recovery of a body not linked to any known event. Darker green indicates a higher proportion of incidents recorded within the region/row.

There is an urgent need for States to dedicate their resources toward ensuring safe migration for all. As part of this, States should collect and disaggregate mortality data by migratory status to ensure evidence-based policies and support identification of missing migrants. Even with the sufficient resources dedicated toward this goal, there are also many challenges inherent to documenting missing migrants linked to the difficulties of documenting any population with an irregular status. Migrants often die on routes that are chosen to reduce the risk of detection, meaning that it is extremely likely that many human remains go missing or are not recovered for long time periods – especially an issue on overseas routes, during river crossings, or on remote desert crossings, all of which are seen in the Americas. In addition, other migrants travelling irregularly who witness a violent death or in the context of a smuggler-facilitated journey may be reticent to report this to the relevant authorities for fear of reprisal. Similarly, families of missing migrants may avoid filing an official missing persons case due to agreements with smugglers who may have better access to information, or in order to avoid negative outcomes for themselves or their loved one abroad.

There is no agreed-upon definition of who is considered a 'missing migrant'. MMP includes only deaths which are clearly linked to the migratory process, namely, that is those who have died attempting to cross an international border or are otherwise clearly in the process of journeying to an international destination. This means that deaths more loosely linked to migratory status, such as deaths of labour migrants or of those in immigration detention or immigration camps are excluded. MMP data therefore most typically include the deaths of migrants who die in transportation accidents, shipwrecks, violent attacks, or due to medical complications during their journeys.

MMP data also includes the number of unidentified remains found at border crossings that are identified to be people who were migrating at the time of their deaths, on the basis of belongings and/or location and/or the characteristics of their death. For instance, a death of an unidentified person might be included if the decedent is found without any identifying documentation in an area known to be on a migration route. Deaths during migration may also be identified based on the cause of death, especially if is related to trafficking, smuggling, or means of travel such as on top of a train, in the back of a cargo truck, as a stowaway on a plane, in unseaworthy boats, or crossing a border fence. While the location and cause of death can provide strong evidence that an unidentified decedent should be included in Missing Migrants Project data, this is always be evaluated in conjunction with migration history and current trends. It should be noted particularly for the Americas that MMP data include only reports clearly linked to deaths, not missing persons reports. Throughout the regions discussed in this report, here is a wealth of evidence that indicates there are many more migrants who are missing and whose fate remains unknown, including many reports from the families directly impacted by these disappearances.



Read more:

Garcia Borja, A. and J. Black

2021 Measuring Migrant Deaths and Disappearances. *Forced Migration Review*, 66:58-60.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

2017 *Mixed messages: Media coverage of migration and fatalities*. In: *Fatal Journeys 3: Improving Data on Missing Migrants* (F. Laczko, A. Singleton, J. Black, eds.). Geneva, Switzerland: IOM. Available at: [www.publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants](http://www.publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants)

## DEATHS AT THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA-MEXICO BORDER

---

The United States of America-Mexico border extends for 3,145 kilometres and traverses challenging terrains, ranging from urban areas to impenetrable deserts and swift-flowing rivers. Approximately 1,045 km of the border is guarded by a physical barrier, commonly known as the border wall, which separates both countries. Migrants crossing into the United States of America try to avoid detection (and removal) by the US Border Patrol at the border itself, as well as within the “100-mile zone” that extends north into the United States of America and where there are also check-points.

The hazards of this border region are exemplified by the fact that nearly 3,000 people lost their lives during migration between 2014-2020, the largest total recorded by MMP on any land border worldwide. Almost 2,500 of these lives have been lost within United States of America territory, primarily in Arizona (1,133) and Texas (1,060), though it should be noted there is a relative paucity of data on the Mexican side of the border. The cause of death of the majority (1,736) of people whose deaths were documented on this border cannot be attributed to any cause. This is because many human remains are found after exposure to the harsh climactic conditions on the border, which make it virtually impossible to determine how long it has been since the individual died. This paucity of data is also due in part to a lack of disaggregation, as many border authorities provide only aggregate annual figures on migrant deaths after the end of each year. but also. The frequency of such cases are particularly tragic given that identifying the deceased person, and providing closure to their family members, becomes extremely difficult when their remains are exposed to the elements. Dr. Greg Hess, Chief Medical Examiner for Pima County, Arizona, explains:

“We are made aware of some instances where somebody finds what they believe is human remains and they are not collected, period, or they are collected way later than when they are first found. It’s a little bit frustrating, because we want to get our hands on those remains — we want to help identify those people” ([Kelety, 2021](#)).

Of the deceased for whom their cause of death is known, nearly 600 drowned – primarily in the Río Bravo/Rio Grande or irrigation canals near the border – and another 377 deaths were due to harsh environmental conditions and lack of adequate shelter, food or water, primarily after crossing into the Sonora Desert in Arizona or through the bush of Southern Texas. Nearly 100 people died in vehicle accidents or other hazardous transport conditions, and 54 people died on their journeys as a result of violence. Another 17 and 33 fatalities were recorded during transit through the border region, respectively, due to accidental deaths or sickness and lack of access to adequate healthcare.



Read more about migrant deaths on the United States of America-Mexico border:

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

2017 Identifying dead migrants, examples from the United States–Mexico border. In: *Fatal Journeys 3: Improving Data on Missing Migrants* (F. Laczko, A. Singleton, J. Black, eds.). International Organization for Migration, Geneva, Switzerland: IOM. Available at: [www.publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants](http://www.publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants)

Leutert, S., S. Lee and V. Rossi

2020 Migrant deaths in south Texas. Strauss Center for International Security and Law, Austin, Texas.





A memorial on the United States of America-Mexico border in Rio Grande City, Texas.  
©Gabiella Sanchez 2021



## DATA CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES ON MIGRANT DEATHS ON THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA'S SOUTHERN BORDER

---

The United States of America's southern border with Mexico border is one of the few places worldwide where government actors regularly collect and publish data on deaths during migration. The best example of this is the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Arizona, which not only has a robust system of documenting and reporting deaths of what they term "Undocumented Border Crossers," but also collaborates with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to better identify the many unidentified remains they handle. This includes publishing PCOME data on migrant deaths with Humane Borders/*Fronteras Compasivas* in the Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants, and collaborating with the Colibrí Center for Human Rights on their work to help families find loved ones who disappeared while crossing the United States of America-Mexico border.

Aside from the area of Arizona covered by PCOME, official data on migrant deaths across the American side of border are challenging to collect due to the many different actors involved and the lack of personnel working on the management and documentation of migrant remains in this context (Reineke, 2016). This is linked to differences in the legislation of medicolegal death investigations from state to state in the United States of America, which affect which actors record deaths. Death records are centralized in New Mexico, meaning there is one state-level actor that holds centralized data. All other states on the United States of America's southern border use a county-based approach to mortality records, meaning that it is often difficult to identify who is responsible for managing migrant remains even within a single state. Different types of actors are also involved, depending on the state legislation. In Arizona and New Mexico, human remains are handled by medical examiners with forensic training. However, coroners and justices of the peace – the actors tasked with recording deaths in the border states of California and Texas – are elected officials who do not necessarily have professional medical training. Though one federal agency does report some data on migrant deaths – the United States Border Patrol provides annual totals of deceased migrants encountered during its operations – this data is not intended to present a complete picture, and indeed the figures provided by county- and state-level actors regularly surpass these.

Read more:

United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
2021. Coroner/Medical Examiner Laws by State. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Atlanta, Georgia. Available at: [www.cdc.gov/php/publications/topic/coroner.html](http://www.cdc.gov/php/publications/topic/coroner.html)

Colibrí Center for Human Rights  
n.d. Report a missing migrant. Available at: [www.colibricenter.org/](http://www.colibricenter.org/)

Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants  
n.d. Humane Borders Database. Available at: [www.humaneborders.info/](http://www.humaneborders.info/)



## DEATHS ON MIGRATION ROUTES TO AND THROUGH CENTRAL AMERICA

---

Excluding deaths near the border with the United States of America, MMP has documented nearly 750 deaths in Central America between 2014-2020, occurring primarily in Mexico (650), but also Panama (50), Nicaragua (21), Guatemala (15), Costa Rica (7) and El Salvador (1). However, it is extremely likely that these numbers are far from the true number of lives lost during migration in this region (see section “Data methodologies, challenges and definitions used in this briefing”). Of the 423 incidents involving a migrant death recorded by MMP in Central America, just 14 came from government sources: federal authorities in the region do not currently keep track of migrant deaths, nor are there mechanisms to do so at the state or municipal level. The vast majority (93%) of recorded incidents involving migrant deaths in Central America sourced exclusively from media reports. This issue is exemplified by estimates of migrant disappearances by NGOs working directly with migrants in Mexico: in 2016, the [Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano](#) (2021) estimated over 70,000 migrant disappearances in Mexico since 2006, and the [Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Personas Migrantes](#) (2015) reported 2,180 disappearances of Central American nationals in the same country in 2015 alone. Another tragic example of the high likelihood of MMP figures being an undercount in Mexico in particular is the periodic discovery of mass graves. Most recently, the remains of 19 people – 16 from Guatemala and 3 from Mexico – were discovered in Tamaulipas state in January 2021. These disappearances and mass deaths have taken place along migration corridors where criminal organizations, including those involved in trafficking, are active. The violence and criminality associated with such groups pose additional risks to migrants on their journeys, and also complicate efforts to document migrant deaths and disappearances.

### ROUTES THROUGH MEXICO

---

It is common for migrants transiting through Mexico and Central America to face marginalization and vulnerability while travelling through irregular channels. Increased immigration enforcement and surveillance throughout Mexico have pushed people towards more clandestine and remote routes, devised in attempts to evade growing forms of control – including State checkpoints spread throughout the country’s highway system. These routes often involve taking highly unsafe means of transport and walking through long stretches of desolate terrain where migrants often encounter systematic abuse, injury and extortion. Lionel, a Honduran migrant transiting through Mexico, said about his decision to migrate:

“You have to risk everything, but I’d rather risk my life here [in Mexico] than go back to Honduras, where even without putting my life at risk people can take it. Really, I would say to people: do you think anyone would leave their home, their family and their country to face this journey if not for pure necessity?” ([González, 2021](#); own translation)

Records collected by MMP indicate that many people die due to the hardships of the journey itself. The main cause of death recorded on migration routes through Mexico – totalling over 300 – is vehicle accidents, mostly related to the freight trains frequently used as a means of transport north by migrants. Though reliance on trains as a mode of transport as decreased in recent years, incidents involving a death on *La Bestia*, as these notorious freight trains have come to be known, account for at least 215 deaths between 2014-2020. Violence along the route – ranging from murder to physical abuse and sexual violence– is the second most common cause of death in the region, accounting for more than 10 per cent of recorded deaths and disappearances since 2014.

Read more about migrant deaths on routes through Mexico:

Dominguez Villegas

2014 Central American Migrants and “La Bestia”: The Route, Dangers, and Government Responses. Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC. Available at: [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-migrants-and-%E2%80%99La-bestia%E2%80%9D-route-dangers-and-government-responses](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-migrants-and-%E2%80%99La-bestia%E2%80%9D-route-dangers-and-government-responses)

Guevara González

2018 Navigating with Coyotes: Pathways of Central American Migrants in Mexico’s Southern Borders. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 676(1):174-193. Available at: [www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716217750574](http://www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716217750574)



Migrants wade the waters of the Rio Suchiate between Guatemala and Mexico. ©IOM/Keith Dannemiller 2014



## JESUIT MIGRANT SERVICE AND THE WORK TO IDENTIFY MISSING MIGRANTS

---

The *Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes* (Jesuit Migrant Service, SJM) has been working for and with migrants in Mexico for more than two decades. Since 2006, SJM has received and responded to missing persons reports linked to migrants in Mexico, formalizing its process in 2011 after five years of ad hoc searches. Once a person is reported missing, SJM uses its extensive network of contacts to conduct the search, including with the many migrant shelters across Mexico and other NGOs and collectives such as the *Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes* (Documentation Network of the Organizations for the Defense of Migrants, REDODEM). The SJM search process strongly emphasizes the centrality of the families in the search for their missing relatives, and includes referrals for those who need legal or psychosocial assistance.

Read more about the SJM's work on missing migrants:

García Borja, A. and E. Viales  
2021 Searching for Missing Migrants in Central and North America: Five Good Practices of Civil Society Organizations. IOM

## DEATHS IN THE DARIEN GAP

---

The Darien Gap is a 575,000-hectare jungle spanning the border between Colombia and Panama, crossed by thousands of migrants from South America, the Caribbean and even South Asia and Africa as part of their dangerous journey north. People on this route face deadly risks related to their transit through inhospitable topography and natural barriers characterized by large rivers, flash floods, dense foliage and wild animals. In recent years, this border region has been increasingly used by vulnerable groups, including Venezuelan refugees and an increasing number of children – both accompanied and unaccompanied – who face additional risks. According to [UNICEF \(2021\)](#), approximately 19,000 children attempted the Darien crossing between January and October 2021, more than three times the number seen in the past five years.

“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, who spent 14 days lost in the Darien Gap ([El Espectador, 2021](#), own translation)

Many people attempting to cross the Darien Gap have been known to suffer from dehydration, illness, fatal falls, as well as violence, sexual and gender-based violence and kidnappings. Violence is often associated with paramilitary and organized crime groups operating in the area, but it should be noted that these latter groups are often comprised of people from indigenous communities who were forcibly displaced by violence in Colombia. Attempting to reach the Darien Gap is also dangerous: many migrants cross the Urabá Gulf in order to reach the Panamanian border, which has led to a number of shipwrecks in recent years.

MMP recorded 115 deaths and disappearances in the Darien Gap and Gulf of Urabá between 2014 and 2020, but anecdotal accounts – which are often impossible to verify – indicate that many more occur. At least 67 lives have been lost in this border region due to drowning, as several incidents have been recorded in large rivers such as the *Turquesa* and *Marragantí*, as well as in the Gulf of Urabá. Another 10 deaths have been recorded due to sickness (8) and violence (2), but given the extremely harsh conditions of the jungle



and, to some degree, the presence of armed groups it is extremely likely far more occur than are recorded. Since 2020, mobility restrictions have been imposed in Central America in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including at the Panama-Colombia transborder area, such as the Colombian port of Necoclí. As a result, many migrants waiting to cross the Darién Gap have been forced to stay in makeshift camps in poor conditions, often without sanitation services or access to adequate food and water. This situation increases their vulnerability and puts them at risk of death as a result of pre-existing diseases (such as diabetes and hypertension) and newly acquired communicable diseases (including COVID-19) and for reasons related to the inhospitable topography of the area. Deaths of migrants in such situations are not included in the MMP figures, which include only deaths during the migration process (see section “Data methodologies, challenges and definitions used in this briefing”).

Read more about migrant deaths in the Darien Gap:

Pardo, D.

2021 El tapón del Darién: la frontera olvidada entre Panamá y Colombia 29 July BBC. Available at: [www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56565732](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56565732)

Doctors Without Borders

2021 La pandemia en Sudamérica empuja a cruzar el Darién a miles de migrantes. 5 August. El Espectador, Available at: [www.elespectador.com/mundo/america/la-pandemia-en-sudamerica-empuja-a-cruzar-el-darien-a-miles-de-migrantes/](http://www.elespectador.com/mundo/america/la-pandemia-en-sudamerica-empuja-a-cruzar-el-darien-a-miles-de-migrantes/)



An IOM boat carrying emergency kits to migrants on the Panama-Colombia border near the Darien Gap. ©IOM / Jean-Philippe Antolin 2006



## DEATHS IN THE CARIBBEAN

---

Migration routes in the Caribbean have the second highest number of migrant deaths and disappearances recorded by the MMP in the region after the United States of America-Mexico border, with the deaths of 800 people recorded between 2014 and 2020. The main cause of death across the Caribbean is drowning in shipwrecks on the many maritime routes within, to and from the region. Given the vast overseas crossings undertaken, the difficulty of monitoring overseas routes, and the likelihood of boats disappearing without a trace it is extremely likely that far more deaths occur during migration in the Caribbean than currently known. The deadliest known routes – involving maritime routes to various locations in the United States of America, sea departures from Venezuela and the crossing from Haiti to the Dominican Republic – are discussed at length below.

### DEATHS ON MARITIME ROUTES TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

---

Though most migrant deaths on United States of America's territory occur on its southern land border, many migrants lose their lives on maritime routes trying to reach the country as well. Of the 788 people whose deaths were documented in the Caribbean between 2014 and 2020, at least 564 were lost at sea whereas just 224 bodies were recovered. This high rate of disappearance has profound impacts not just on the completeness of the data presented in this section, but also on the many families likely still waiting for news of a loved one who may never be found.

### DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES EN ROUTE TO THE FLORIDA STRAITS

---

In the Northern Caribbean, there have been a number of shipwrecks of people attempting to reach Florida, which have claimed the lives of at least 59 people between 2014 and 2020, all of whom were Cuban nationals. These Cuban *balseros* (“rafters”) used an immigration route that has been frequented since at least 1994 when the United States of America's ‘wet feet, dry feet’ policy was implemented, allowing Cubans to pursue legal residency within a year of arrival in the United States of America regardless of the way they entered. Though fewer crossings have been observed on this route since the policy ended in 2017, the number of deaths recorded by MMP has not decreased meaningfully (see section “Migrant deaths in Central and North America during the first seven months of 2021” below).

Read more:

Ackerman, H

1996 The Balsero Phenomenon, 1991-1994. *Cuban Studies*, 26: 169-200. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/24487714](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24487714)

Pentón, M. and B. Guillén

2020 Cubans are still arriving in Miami aboard rafts and speed boats. Available at: [www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article239735658.html](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article239735658.html)

Sáez, A

2021 En el Caribe también hay una ruta de los naufragios. Available at: [www.revista5w.com/temas/migraciones/en-el-caribe-tambien-hay-una-ruta-de-los-naufragios-31419](http://www.revista5w.com/temas/migraciones/en-el-caribe-tambien-hay-una-ruta-de-los-naufragios-31419)



## DEATHS FROM THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC TO PUERTO RICO

---

The overseas crossing of the Mona Passage between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, a territory of the United States of America, has been used for decades by migrants from both countries. In recent years, the dangers of the unpredictable seas in this Mona Passage have been compounded by the use of overloaded boats, called *yolas*, which sometimes carry more than 100 people. 118 deaths were documented on this crossing between 2014 and 2020, most of whom (107) were Dominican nationals.

Read more:

Bishop, M

2015 The Other Border: Unauthorized Immigration to Puerto Rico. Available at: [www.latinousa.org/2015/01/02/border-unauthorized-immigration-puerto-rico/](http://www.latinousa.org/2015/01/02/border-unauthorized-immigration-puerto-rico/)

## VENEZUELAN MIGRANT DEATHS EN ROUTE TO CARIBBEAN NATIONS

---

Since late 2019, many Venezuelan nationals depart from the northern coast of their country in an attempt to reach Caribbean nations, primarily departing from Güiría en route to Trinidad and Tobago, or from Falcón to Aruba and Curaçao. At least 126 Venezuelan nationals died attempting to reach nearby Caribbean nations between 2014 and 2020, including en route to Trinidad and Tobago (72), Curaçao (37), and Aruba (17). All but six of these deaths were recorded after 2019, when the Venezuelan presidential crisis began. On this route, criminal gangs are often involved in smuggling (and in some cases trafficking) of Venezuelan migrants. Luis Izaguirre, the vicar of Güiría, emphasized:

“Crossing the gulf is risking one’s life, literally. Whoever sets foot on a boat [from Venezuela] to Trinidad is half dead, that is the truth.”- ([France24, 2020](https://www.france24.com/en/america/2020/12/20-venezuela-migrants-die-attempting-to-reach-trinidad-and-tobago/); own translation)

Read more about the deaths of Venezuelan nationals in the Caribbean:

Rodríguez, N. y J. Collins

2021 Venezuelan migration and refugee crisis: Situation report December 2020. Available at: [www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/4/28/venezuelans-look-to-a-dangerous-caribbean-escape-route#:~:text=As%20desperation%20grows%2C%20Venezuelans%20look,](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/4/28/venezuelans-look-to-a-dangerous-caribbean-escape-route#:~:text=As%20desperation%20grows%2C%20Venezuelans%20look,)

2021 As desperation grows, Venezuelans look to a dangerous Caribbean escape route. Available at: [www.reliefweb.int/report/colombia/situation-report-venezuelan-migration-and-refugee-crisis-december-2020#:~:text=December%2030%2C%202020%20A%20new,in%20Venezuela%20remains%20in%20place,](http://www.reliefweb.int/report/colombia/situation-report-venezuelan-migration-and-refugee-crisis-december-2020#:~:text=December%2030%2C%202020%20A%20new,in%20Venezuela%20remains%20in%20place,)



## HAITI TO THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

---

Though migrant flows between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share the same island, are difficult to monitor, it is estimated that nearly half a million Haitian immigrants are living as irregular migrants in the Dominican Republic as of April 2021. Migrants cross the border both via sea and land routes, adding to the difficulty of tracking deaths during migration from one country to the other. In total, MMP has recorded 38 deaths of Haitians on this route between 2014 and 2020, due to not just drowning (25) but also four deadly incidents involving violence at the border and seven deaths linked to vehicle accidents on land.

Read more:

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

2021 Haiti — Monitoring Of Migratory Flows Between Haiti And The Dominican Republic 3 (April 2021). International Organization for Migration, Geneva, Switzerland. Available at: [www.dtm.iom.int/reports/haiti-%E2%80%94-monitoring-migratory-flows-between-haiti-and-dominican-republic-3-april-2021](http://www.dtm.iom.int/reports/haiti-%E2%80%94-monitoring-migratory-flows-between-haiti-and-dominican-republic-3-april-2021)

### WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF MISSING MIGRANTS: INVISIBLE, BUT VITAL ACTORS

---

Women and children face heightened risks on irregular migration routes across the regions discussed in this briefing, but data on these groups are exceptionally poor. However, both groups are uniquely affected by the issue of missing migrants and are also some of the most active players in the search for lost loved ones. For the most part, there is little information in the MMP dataset on the age and gender of those who have lost their lives during migration in the Americas. Of more than 5,000 migrant deaths and disappearances recorded between 2014 and 2020, 415 are known to be women and 151 are known to be children – though many, many more remain unidentified, as discussed in the first section of this report.

Despite the relative paucity of data on missing migrant women and children, reports from across the region indicate that women and children face specific risks in addition to the broad risks linked to irregular migration discussed throughout this paper.<sup>3</sup> Migrant women and girls face higher risks of violence, especially sexual- and gender-based violence, along migration routes in the Americas. For example, anecdotal reports indicate that women on the move take birth control preventatively because they know there is a high risk that they will be victims of sexual violence at some point of their journey. Both women and children are generally believed to face higher risks of drowning during shipwrecks – children because they are less likely to be strong swimmers and women because they are often tasked with caring for their children – and it is likely that similar factors affect the safety of women and children exposed to the risks present in other areas with harsh environmental conditions such as the Darien Gap and the Sonora Desert.

---

<sup>3</sup> See for example Schmidt, A. and S. Buechler (2017) “I risk everything because I have already lost everything”: *Central American Female Migrants Speak Out on the Migrant Trail in Oaxaca, Mexico*. *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 16(1):139-164; Casillas, R. (2010) *Niñas, niños y adolescentes migrantes centroamericanos en poblaciones del sur de México*. International Organization for Migration, San Jose.

Though women and children face specific risks, they also play a central role in the search for missing migrants. This role is exemplified by the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants (*Caravana de Madres de Migrantes Desaparecidos*), a group of women searching for their children who have disappeared on migratory routes toward the United States of America. Since 2005, the Caravana has made an annual journey across Mexico to search for lost loved ones and to raise awareness. The group also hosted the first-ever Global Summit of Mothers of Missing Migrants in November 2018, which brought together more than 40 relatives of missing migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Senegal, Mauritania, Tunisia and Algeria to share their stories and exchange experiences of their search for the whereabouts of their children.

Read more:

Sánchez Dionis, M., A. García Borja and K. Dearden  
2021 Missing Migrant Children in the Americas. Migration Policy Practice, XI(2):4-11.

Available at: [www.publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MPP-45.pdf](http://www.publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MPP-45.pdf)

Semine Kökdil, E. and D. Mackey  
2021 The Mothers of the Disappeared search Mexico's migrant trail for answers. *The New Yorker*, 26 May. Available at: [www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/the-mothers-of-the-disappeared-search-mexicos-migrant-trail-for-answers](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/the-mothers-of-the-disappeared-search-mexicos-migrant-trail-for-answers)



A woman ties the shoe of a boy in a caravan of migrants in Chiapas, Mexico  
© Rafael Rodríguez/IOM 2018

## MIGRANT DEATHS IN CENTRAL AND NORTH AMERICA DURING THE FIRST SEVEN MONTHS OF 2021

In the first seven months of 2021, the deaths of 442 people were recorded on migration routes in North and Central America, including the Caribbean and the Darien Gap. This is an increase over the 368 people who died in the equivalent period of 2020. This may be linked to increased migration flows overall due to the relaxation of some COVID-related measures, but could also indicate an increase in risks migrants take to avoid mobility restrictions still in place. In addition, natural disasters in Central America and the Caribbean and shifting narratives about the opportunities for asylum in the United States of America likely contributed to migration flows in 2021.


Most of these deaths were documented in the United States of America-Mexico border region, where 283 deaths have been recorded already in 2021, compared to 275 and 265 deaths documented in the equivalent periods of 2020 and 2019, respectively. This is particularly of concern given that data on deaths on the border are typically received only after the end of each year, so current figures likely underestimate the true loss of life in 2021. One emerging trend is an apparent increase in attempts to reach California by sea: the United States Border Patrol encountered 92,930 migrants in the San Diego sector between January and July 2021, a 65 per cent increase compared to the 35,067 reported in the equivalent period of 2020 ([U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2021](#)).

Table 2: deaths recorded during migration across the US-Mexico border by country and state, first seven months of 2019-2021

United States of America			Mexico						Total	Total
California	Arizona	New Mexico	Texas	Baja California	Sonora	Chihuahua	Coahuila	Tamaulipas	Jan-July	full year
26	108	3	71	5	0	1	23	38	275	n/a
22	135	0	46	2	1	4	21	36	267	487
24	91	3	91	3	0	6	15	32	265	507

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2021

Deaths in the Caribbean thus far in 2021 have also increased compared to 2020: 120 people are known to have died trying to migrate to other countries between January and July, compared to 71 in the equivalent period of 2020. This includes dozens of lives being lost on maritime routes to the United States of America in the first seven months of 2021: at least 32 people have died on the route from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico in two separate shipwrecks, double the 16 deaths recorded in the first seven months of 2020. Another 38 Cubans lost their lives in four separate shipwrecks en route to Florida in the first seven months of 2021, an alarming death toll considering just two shipwrecks totalling 20 lives lost were documented by MMP between 2017 and 2020. In addition, 17 Venezuelan nationals are known to have died in one shipwreck en route to Trinidad and Tobago in between January and July 2021, compared to 16 documented on maritime routes from Venezuela in the equivalent period of 2020.



Though the 16 deaths recorded in the Darien Gap in 2021 is a lower figure than documented on other routes in the Americas, the extensive data collection challenges and many anecdotal reports indicate that the situation for migrants in this border region is increasingly dangerous. The lack of access to the Darien Gap is of particular concern as there are strong indications that flows across this border region have increased dramatically in 2021, with an estimated 46,000 migrants crossing between January and July 2021 compared to 6,465 documented in all of 2020 ([Rueda, 2021](#)). Juan, a Cuban migrant who crossed the Darien Gap on foot with a group of 20, provided one such report:

“A group of 7 or 8 men with rifles and machetes assaulted us on the second day. They search you and steal your money, cell phones, food, even your cooking pot. They search the women’s private parts, threaten them, separate them from the group and rape them. Some of them repeatedly.” ([El Espectador, 2021](#); own translation)

While a significant amount of data on migrant deaths in the regions discussed here are provided only at the end of the year, the information available indicates that migration in 2021 has become deadlier than ever.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

---

With thousands of deaths documented across the Americas and many more likely uncounted, there is a real crisis of migrant deaths across the region. States have committed to promoting safe migration under both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), but little meaningful action has been taken to further this commitment. There is a lack of government actors – even at technical level – working to document migrant deaths, let alone take meaningful action to prevent them, as indicated by the dearth of official sources in the MMP dataset. The incompleteness of the data discussed throughout this briefing has profound impacts. With poor data, policymakers do not have the information they need to implement effective migration policies and programmes. Beyond this, incomplete data means that there are countless migrants whose fate and whereabouts remain unknown, impacting tens if not hundreds of thousands of families and communities waiting for news of their lost loved ones.

“I am always searching and waiting for him. For me he is alive. I continue talking about him in the present tense. . . and I will continue searching for him until I can find an answer about him.” – Maria, whose son left El Salvador for Mexico in 2010 before disappearing ([UN Human Rights, 2019](#))



## RECOMMENDATIONS

---

Based on the trends in the data on missing migrants currently available, and the many data challenges identified by the MMP team in the Americas, the following actions must urgently be taken by States in aiming to uphold their commitments under the SDGs and GCM:

**Prioritize regularizing migration to prevent migrant deaths and disappearances:**

There are no documented cases of deaths during regular migration movements, indicating that it is the irregularization of migratory movements that is the underlying cause of death in all incidents recorded in the MMP database. People on the move are exceptionally vulnerable to harm, including death or disappearance, when restrictive migration policies force them into situations of irregularity. These vulnerabilities can be exacerbated when migrants belong to at-risk groups such as women and children. In order to uphold their commitments to safe migration, States must provide legal alternatives to dangerous irregular routes and address the underlying drivers of irregular migration and displacement.

**Improve documentation, management and recovery of migrant remains:**

The recovery of the remains of people on the move must be prioritized in order to adequately document the phenomenon of migrant deaths and to identify individuals to provide closure to their families. Local and federal government actors should work to set high standards for body management, identification and communication of data, including identifying criteria to determine migratory status for unidentified remains. Beyond this, research and data collection into the many missing migrants who remain undocumented are badly needed to inform evidence-based policy and programmes aimed at ensuring safe migration for all.

**Treat migrants and their families with respect in all processes involving missing migrants:**

States must ensure that migrants and their families should have full access to justice, due process and equal legal treatment. Migrants and their families are a crucial but largely untapped source of information on this issue, as many fear reporting a death or disappearance. Those who come forward should be allowed to make such reports without reprisal, regardless of migratory status. Authorities who come into contact with those wishing to report a death or disappearance must act in a respectful, sensitive manner, especially considering the precarity of many migrants and families in irregular situations. All reports of a death or disappearance should be adequately investigated in line with national and international law.

**Promote coordination across agencies, actors and countries:**

Even within countries, coordination of data on missing migrants can be disjointed, and international efforts are even more scattered. Sharing best practices on missing persons reports and human remains linked to migration should be promoted by governments. These should include the extensive work of migrants and their families across the Americas, as well as the many non-governmental and civil society organizations working them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

---

ACNUDH

2019 In search for missing migrants, relatives never lose hope. Available at: [www.unhumanrights.medium.com/in-search-for-missing-migrants-relatives-never-lose-hope-e53e71660c99](https://www.unhumanrights.medium.com/in-search-for-missing-migrants-relatives-never-lose-hope-e53e71660c99)

El Espectador

2021 La pandemia en Sudamérica empuja a cruzar el Darién a miles de migrantes. Available at: [www.elespectador.com/mundo/america/la-pandemia-en-sudamerica-empuja-a-cruzar-el-darien-a-miles-de-migrantes/](https://www.elespectador.com/mundo/america/la-pandemia-en-sudamerica-empuja-a-cruzar-el-darien-a-miles-de-migrantes/)

France24

2020 Cruzar es arriesgar la vida: dolor y dudas sobre naufragio de migrantes venezolanos. Available at: [www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20201218-cruzar-es-arriesgar-la-vida-dolor-y-dudas-sobre-naufragio-de-migrantes-venezolanos](https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20201218-cruzar-es-arriesgar-la-vida-dolor-y-dudas-sobre-naufragio-de-migrantes-venezolanos)

González, M

2021 Uno tiene que arriesgarse a todo: en la Carretera con los miles de familias y niños migrantes que intentan llegar a EE.UU. Available at: [www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56425724](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56425724)

Kelety, J

2021 Arizona's Migrant Graveyard: Searching for Bodies and Bones in the Borderlands. Available at: [www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/arizona-migrant-graveyard-desert-deaths-2021-11542178](https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/arizona-migrant-graveyard-desert-deaths-2021-11542178)

Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano

2016 Central American Migration. Available at: [www.movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org/2016/07/13/central-american-migration/](https://www.movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org/2016/07/13/central-american-migration/)

Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Personas Migrantes

2015 Migración en tránsito por México: rostro de una crisis humanitaria internacional. REDODEM. Available at: [www.redodem.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Informe-Redodem-2015.pdf](https://www.redodem.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Informe-Redodem-2015.pdf)

Reineke, R

2016 Missing persons and unidentified remains at the United States–Mexico border. In *Fatal Journeys Volume 2: Identification and tracing of dead and missing migrants* (T. Brian and F. Laczko, eds.). IOM, Geneva. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-2-identification-and-tracing-dead-and-missing-migrants>

Rueda, M

2021 46K migrants risked their lives crossing the Darién Gap in 2021. That's more than the last three years combined. Available at: [www.theworld.org/stories/2021-08-13/46k-migrants-risked-their-lives-crossing-dari-n-gap-2021-thats-more-last-three](https://www.theworld.org/stories/2021-08-13/46k-migrants-risked-their-lives-crossing-dari-n-gap-2021-thats-more-last-three)

U.S. Customs and Border Protection

2021 Southwest Land Border Encounters (By Component). Available at: [www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters-by-component](https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters-by-component)

UNICEF

2021 UNICEF: 2021 registra el mayor número de niños y niñas migrantes que cruzan la selva del Darién hacia EEUU. Available at: [www.unicef.org/lac/comunicados-prensa/unicef-2021-registra-el-mayor-numero-de-ninos-y-ninas-migrantes-que-cruzan-de-darien-a-eeuu](https://www.unicef.org/lac/comunicados-prensa/unicef-2021-registra-el-mayor-numero-de-ninos-y-ninas-migrantes-que-cruzan-de-darien-a-eeuu)



**OIM**  
ONU MIGRACIÓN