



ABOUT The *Data Bulletin: Informing the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration* series aims to summarize in an accurate and accessible fashion existing evidence on migration to support the discussion and any follow-up activities.

As part of the project “Support to IOM for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration,” funded by the European Union, *Data Bulletin* outlines the strengths and limitations of relevant migration data and highlights innovative data practices that are pertinent to the Global Compact for Migration. This publication reflects the collaborative nature of the Global Compact for Migration process by including relevant contributions from different parts of IOM, as well as other agencies and migration experts.

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Migrant deaths and disappearances

Since 2000, more than 60,000 deaths and disappearances during migration have been recorded worldwide.¹ These numbers not only highlight the issue of migrant fatalities and the consequences for families searching for lost loved ones but can also be used to illustrate the risks associated with irregular migration and to encourage the design of policies and programmes to ensure safe migration. However, data on migrant fatalities are highly scattered and incomplete, and figures on missing migrants are therefore best understood as a minimum estimate of the true number of people who die or go missing along migratory routes worldwide. The importance of the problem of deaths during migration has been acknowledged in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which includes as one of its objectives to “[s]ave lives and establish coordinated efforts on missing migrants.”

IOM's Missing Migrants Project² has documented the deaths and disappearances of at least 28,579 migrants worldwide since 2014. Nearly 60 per cent of these fatalities were recorded in the **Mediterranean**, where several thousand lives have been lost each year between 2014 and 2018. The vast majority of deaths are recorded in the Central Mediterranean route, where a longer overseas journey compared to the Eastern and Western routes and dangerous smuggling patterns have led to at least 14,744 deaths since 2014. Because deaths in the Central Mediterranean often occur during large shipwrecks, more than 10,000 migrant lives have been lost at sea over the last five years, meaning that countless families do not know the fate of their loved ones.

Several other regions of the world have seen thousands of deaths during migration since 2014. Nearly 3,500 deaths have been recorded across **North Africa**, based on a relatively small number of surveys, though anecdotal reports indicate that many more fatalities occur than are recorded, particularly in the Sahara Desert, due to the harsh conditions of the journey. At least 2,000 people have died or have gone missing during migration across **sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa** since 2014, though, again, the scarcity of data means that this is likely a gross undercount of the true number of fatalities. In addition, more than 2,100 deaths and disappearances have been recorded in **Southeast Asia** in the last five years, many of which are linked to the exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar from 2014 to 2015 and again in late 2017. In the **Americas**, where data are quite poor, more than 1,750 deaths have been recorded on the United States–Mexico border since 2014, and more than 1,000 have been documented in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean over the same period. Here, too, anecdotal evidence and quantitative studies of missing persons indicate that far more deaths occur during migration than are currently reported.

Overview of available data sources

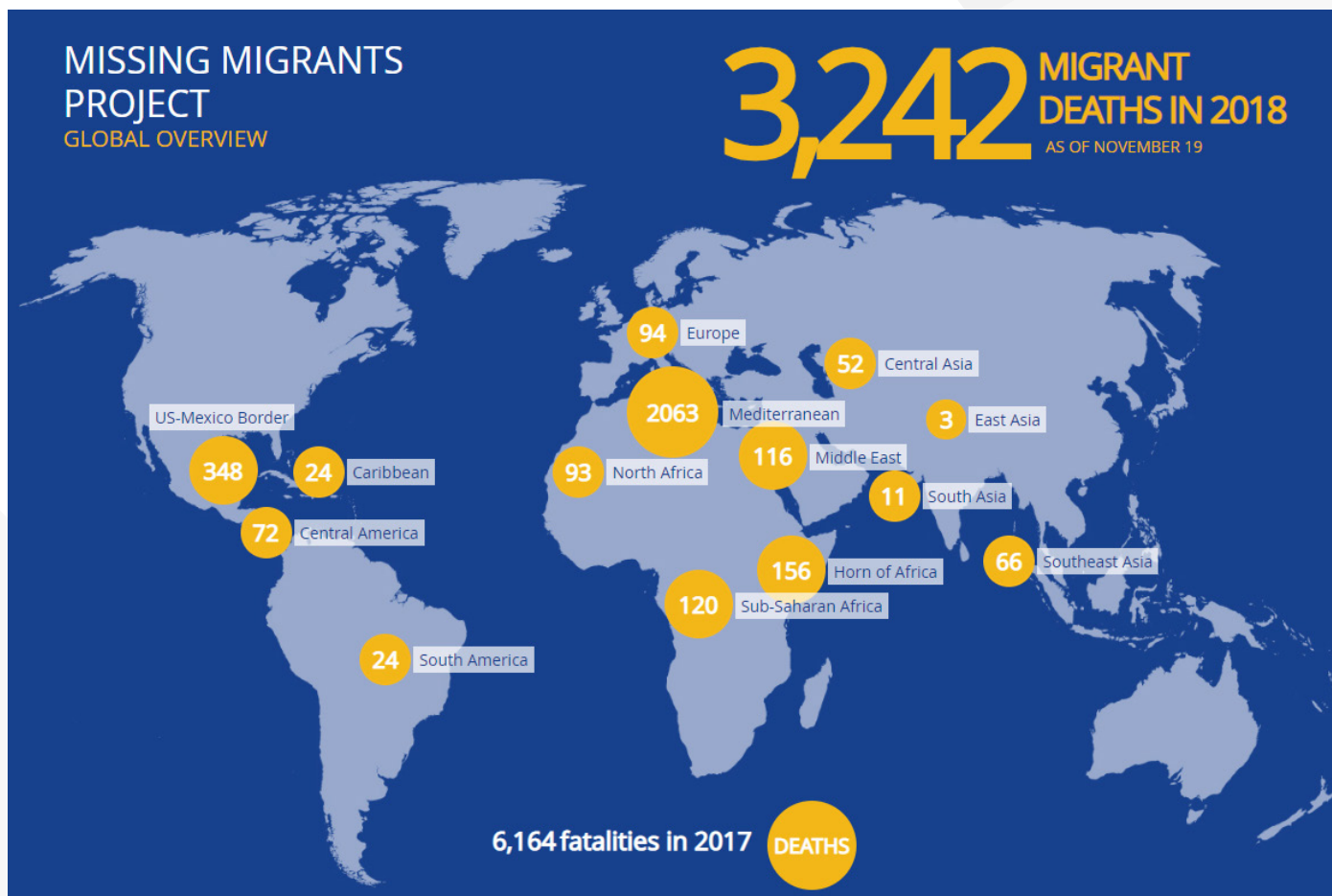
Data on fatalities during migration are scattered and few data sources exist. IOM's Missing Migrants Project currently provides the only open-access global database on migrant deaths and disappearances, but it relies on reports from a wide variety of sources (discussed in the Data gaps and challenges section). Several other regional, national and local databases

¹ See, for instance: T. Brian and F. Laczko (eds.), *Fatal Journeys, Volume 2: Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants* (International Organization for Migration, Geneva,). Available from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys_vol2.pdf

² Project website: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int>



Figure 1: Missing Migrant Project: Global Overview



Note: The above map is adapted from the Missing Migrants Project website: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean/pdf>

exist that are accessible to the public. The UNITED List of Deaths³ has documented more than 34,000 deaths along migration routes to Europe since 1993. In the Mediterranean, the Deaths at the Borders Database⁴ has documented bodies recovered on Europe’s southern shores between 1990 and 2013. On the United States–Mexico border, the Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants⁵ publishes data on migrant bodies processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, which covers most of the state of Arizona. The Australian Border Deaths Database⁶ covers deaths “associated with Australia’s borders” from 2000 onwards. For much of the rest of the world, either no data on migrant deaths and disappearances exist, or existing data is not openly available. This lack of data means it is difficult to identify trends of unsafe migration over time outside of the regions identified.

Data gaps and challenges

Data on migrant deaths and disappearances are challenging to collect for various reasons, including the following:

- **Having different definitions of “migrant deaths” mean that comparison and cross-checking across datasets are difficult.** What constitutes a “migrant death” is highly contested and definitions may vary significantly. IOM’s Missing Migrants Project includes data on confirmed

fatalities which occur during migration, as well as disappearances of people migrating via sea or river crossings. However, it excludes deaths in refugee camps and migrant detention centres, as well as those which occur after migrants reach their destinations. Other datasets on migrant deaths use more-or-less restrictive definitions: The Deaths at the Border Database includes only bodies recovered from trans-Mediterranean migration, for example, whereas the Australia Border Deaths Database includes deaths and disappearances during migration, as well as, inter alia, those which occur in offshore detention centres, during border enforcement operations and after return to countries of origin and transit.

- **As the vast majority of deaths and disappearances during migration occur when migrants travel irregularly, migrants who die en route often do so while attempting to escape detection.** Another challenge inherent to collecting data on migrant fatalities is linked to the nature of irregular migration. Irregular migration routes often traverse remote regions which pose both risks to migrants themselves and challenges to those seeking to uncover the fate of the missing. In the Sonoran Desert, which spans the southwestern border between the United States and Mexico, many bodies are recovered only after weeks or months: 58 per cent of migrant remains processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner were already skeletal due to extended exposure to the elements. Similarly, there are strong indications that many more bodies are lost in the vastness of the Mediterranean Sea than are currently counted: At least 822 bodies washed up to North African shores between 2014 and 2018 that were not associated with any known shipwreck.

³ UNITED for Intercultural Action. See <http://unitedagainstrefugeedeaths.eu/about-the-campaign/about-the-united-list-of-deaths>

⁴ University of Amsterdam’s Death at the Borders Database. Project website: www.borderdeaths.org/?page_id=5

⁵ Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants. Project website: www.humaneborders.info

⁶ Monash University’s Border Crossing Observatory. Project website: <https://arts.monash.edu/social-sciences/border-crossing-observatory/australian-border-deaths-database>

Despite these challenges, many of the gaps in data on migrant deaths and disappearances are linked simply to a lack of reliable sources of data. There is a dearth of information on migrant deaths from official sources: No country currently publishes data on fatalities disaggregated by migratory status, and even at local levels, the vast majority of coroners, medical examiners and other authorities dealing with post-mortem processing and identification do not distinguish between migrants and non-migrants. No national or local authority currently produces estimates of migrant disappearances.

The lack of official data on deaths and disappearances during migration necessitates the use of a variety of sources. This includes in-depth investigation of local post-mortem records – as in the case of the Deaths at the Borders Database’s investigation of records from Southern European States – or, more commonly, reliance on unofficial sources. IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, for example, relies on official data and other sources, such as press releases from border authorities where possible; however, 78 per cent of its records come from reports by international agencies, non-governmental organizations and the media, and survey data. This is reflected in the dataset’s “source quality” variable, which ranks each incident involving a migrant death from 1 (a single media report) to 5 (an official national or local source). The UNITED List of Deaths and the Australia Border Deaths Database rely almost exclusively on media reports.

The necessity of using a variety of sources means that data on fatalities during migration are highly incomplete not only in terms of coverage, but also in terms of disaggregation by basic demographic characteristics.

Data on the specific age of migrant decedents are available for less than 8 per cent of recorded fatalities in the Missing Migrants Project database, while the sex of migrants is known in only 9 per cent of cases. Similarly, information on the country of origin of missing migrants is available in less than a third of cases.

The lack of disaggregation of data on fatalities during migration means that it is difficult to identify groups which are most at risk of death. This gap can be linked to the scarcity of official records and the many migrant bodies which are never recovered, as discussed above, but also to the challenges of identifying missing migrants. One example of this is the initiative dedicated to recovering and identifying bodies from the Lampedusa shipwrecks in October 2013: Of the 366 migrants who died, just 31 (8.5%) have been identified.⁷

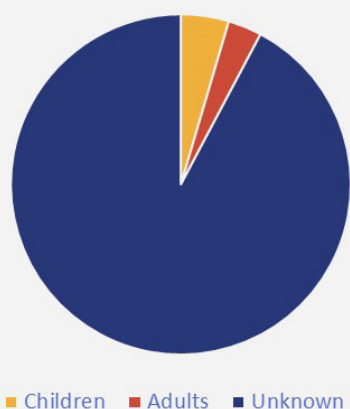
While there are significant gaps in available data on deaths and disappearances during migration, even less is known about several interrelated issues. The tracing and identification of missing migrants are extremely challenging. As discussed above, migrants who die or go missing during migration are likely to travel without documents, and the condition in which migrant bodies are recovered (or not) may often prevent identification. Most concerning, no coherent data exist on the number of migrants reported missing, nor information on the families who are still searching for loved ones lost during migration. IOM estimates that between 75,000 and 250,000 individuals may have lost family members during migration since 2014, based on the number of unidentified persons in the Missing Migrants Project database.

Recommendations

The inclusion of a commitment to “[s]ave lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants” under Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration encourages governments and relevant stakeholders to improve data on migrant deaths and disappearances, as well as the related issues of the tracing and identification of migrants and assistance to the families left behind. Similarly, the call to “strengthen the global evidence base on international migration” under Objective 1 of the Global Compact for Migration can serve as an impetus to

⁷ L. Olivieri et al., Challenges in the identification of dead migrants in the Mediterranean: The case study of the Lampedusa shipwreck of October 3rd 2013, *Forensic Science International*, 285:121–128. Available from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29482110

Figure 2: Data on child deaths and disappearances during migration



- Children make up **4.5 per cent** of migrant fatalities recorded by IOM January 2014 to September 2018
- At least 241 under the age of 10
 - 165 under the age of 5
- 48% of child migrant deaths were recorded in the **Mediterranean**
 - 14.6% in Central Mediterranean
 - 31.6% in Eastern Mediterranean
 - 1.8% in Western Mediterranean

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Source: IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, 2018.

Note: Data from 1 Jan 2014 – 4 Oct 2018. Includes estimated 250 child deaths during Rohingya crisis of 2014.

improve data on migrant fatalities worldwide. These data are necessary to preserve the lives and human dignity of migrants, prevent migrant deaths and injuries through search and rescue operations, and support families with missing relatives through the identification of those who have died or gone missing, as also stated in Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration.

IOM's most recent volume in the Fatal Journeys series⁸ makes five recommendations aimed at improving data on deaths and disappearances during migration that emerge from the comparison of regions and innovative methodologies discussed at length in the report:

1. Make better use of administrative data

Local, national and regional authorities that collect data on missing migrants should publish these data wherever and whenever possible, in accordance with data protection standards. These authorities should also cooperate to standardize data collection to improve the possibilities for data comparison and cross-checking.

2. Promote survey-based data collection

In areas where few institutions collect data on missing migrants, or where access may be an issue, surveys can provide new data on deaths and the risks people face during migration.

3. Explore new technologies

The use of modern technologies and data sources, such as "big data," piloted in some regions, could be expanded to improve the availability and completeness of data on migrant fatalities.

4. Work with families and civil society

The needs of families of missing migrants should be a central concern in all stages of data collection and identification processes. Data collection efforts led by family and civil

society groups should be encouraged through collaboration with other actors.

5. Improve data sharing

Around the world, data on missing migrants are fragmented and not shared effectively. Data-sharing and cooperation between actors working on the issue of missing migrants should be promoted to enhance the evidence base on the issue and inform appropriate responses.

Example of best practice: Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants⁹

The Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants is one of the few examples of collaboration between official and civil society actors which enables families searching for missing loved ones to search existing medical records. The open-access database presents forensic records of migrant bodies found in Arizona near the United States–Mexico border, and is an ongoing partnership between the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, which processes most migrant bodies found in Arizona, and Humane Borders, Inc., an NGO that provides humanitarian assistance to migrants in the Sonoran Desert. The frequently updated database is available in both English and Spanish and allows users to search thousands of administrative records from 2000 to the present.

⁸ Publications available for download from https://publications.iom.int/search-books?keyword=fatal+journeys&category=All&subject=All&book_lang=All&country=All&year=All

⁹ Project website: www.humaneborders.info

IOM's GMDAC

In response to growing calls for better data on migration, and for better use and presentation of migration data, IOM has created the Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC).

Located in Berlin, Germany, the Centre aims to provide authoritative and timely analyses of data on global migration issues as a global hub for data and statistics on migration.

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