

ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Americas

January – December 2021

With 1,238 migrant deaths and disappearances recorded, 2021 was the year with the highest number of lives lost in the Americas since 2014, when the Missing Migrants Project (MMP) began documenting migrant deaths. A significant increase compared to figures recorded in 2020 (798 deaths) and even before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 (854 deaths).

The largest demographic in the available data on migrant deaths in the Americas is unidentified people – nearly 500 individuals died on migratory routes in 2021 and remain unidentified. Of those who have been identified, Mexicans make up the largest proportion (154 individuals), followed by Guatemalans (129 individuals) and Venezuelans (94 individuals).

2021 was the deadliest year at the United States-Mexico border since at least 2014: 728 migrant deaths and disappearances were recorded, 53 per cent more than in 2020.

Maritime routes also claimed many lives in 2021, linked to the extreme environmental conditions at sea and the unseaworthy vessels often used for migration. In 2021, 67 deaths and disappearances were recorded on migratory routes from the Caribbean to the United States. Additionally, 65 deaths and disappearances were recorded on the route from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. More people may have gone missing on these routes in ‘invisible shipwrecks’ – cases where boats disappear without a trace.

In the Darien Gap, 51 migrant lives lost were recorded in 2021. However, anecdotal reports indicate that many migrants die in the Darien Gap and their remains are neither recovered nor reported, so this figure presents only a small fraction of the true number of lives lost.

Arnaldo* was a 42-year-old Haitian man. The last photograph taken of him showed him smiling. After the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, he decided to look for a better future abroad. He lived in Brazil and then in Chile, until 2020 when he lost his job due to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. He decided to go to the United States. The few options for regular migration forced him to make the arduous overland crossing through the Darien Gap from which he would never emerge. Arnaldo died in August 2021 along with other Haitian migrants, swept away by a river in the jungle.

* Arnaldo” is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the deceased person.

In the wake of the Venezuelan economic crisis many people have been forced to leave their country through irregular routes, including dangerous overseas crossings to Caribbean nations. During 2021, 27 migrant deaths and disappearances were recorded on these routes. Additionally, 148 people died or went missing in 2021 on land routes in South America, including 65 Venezuelans.

Given the challenges to collect data on migrant deaths in the region and the lack of official sources of information, all MMP figures should be considered an undercount. These deaths and disappearances are related to the lack of options for safe and regular mobility, which increases the likelihood of migrants opting for irregular migration pathways that put their lives at risk. States must honor their commitments – in the Global Compact for Migration, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and elsewhere – to save migrant lives and prevent further deaths and disappearances.



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