

ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Southern Africa

January 2014 - December 2021

OVERVIEW

Deaths and disappearances during irregular migration in Southern Africa remain poorly documented. While there are no formalized procedures to measure irregular migration, the continuing trend of irregular human mobility and mixed migration in the region lead to incidences of deaths and disappearances during migration. However, it has remained difficult if not impossible to provide empirical evidence of these incidents, except for some large-loss-of-life events. Gaining a better understanding of the risks and complexities of mixed migration flows with a specific focus on fatalities and disappearances during transit has remained a core priority of the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Missing Migrants Project (MMP).

Though data on deaths in Southern Africa remain scarce, anecdotal reports indicate many more deaths that are currently documented occur during irregular migration, linked to porous nature of Points of Entry (PoE), strict visa regimes, structural bottlenecks, and structural vulnerabilities in destination, transit and origin countries.¹ In addition to the troubling incidents of deaths and disappearances during migration in the region, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has significantly contributed to cases of aggravated smuggling and trafficking in persons, along unpopular migration routes.

Southern Africa is a region with a combination of sending, receiving and transit countries, given the unequal levels of development, climate and environmental change, political and social landscape among other push and pull factors. Though most migration takes place within the region, with South Africa notably a major destination for intraregional flows, the Southern Africa region is also a springboard for migration into Europe, the USA, Australia among other countries in the Global North through Mozambique, Namibia, or South Africa.

This inaugural briefing, which will be followed by annual briefings on migrant deaths in the region, provides a contextual insight on the available data on migrant deaths and disappearances from 2014-2021 in the Southern Africa region², based on IOM's Missing Migrants Project. The briefing highlights the regional realities and plausible factors contributing to migrant deaths and disappearances. Given the extensive data challenges in the region, this briefing also highlights ways to improve data and provide humanitarian assistance and policy recommendations in the Southern Africa region.

IRREGULAR MIGRATION, MIGRANT DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Between 2014 and 2021, the Missing Migrants Project recorded a total of 685 deaths and disappearances during migration in Southern Africa. Of the total fatalities, 613 recorded were confirmed deaths while the remaining 75 represent episodes of disappearances in which victims are presumed dead but their bodies were not found, typically during attempted crossings of rivers.

1 See Mlambo, V. H. (2021) on Irregular Migration , Cross Border Crime and the Securitization Theory : a South African Reflection. 2(1), 12–28; Triandafyllidou, A., Bartolini, L., & Guidi, C. F. (2019). Exploring the Links Between Enhancing Regular Pathways and Discouraging Irregular Migration: A Discussion Paper to Inform Future Policy Deliberations. International Organization for Migration.

2 IOM regional office for Southern Africa covers the following countries: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Eswatini, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

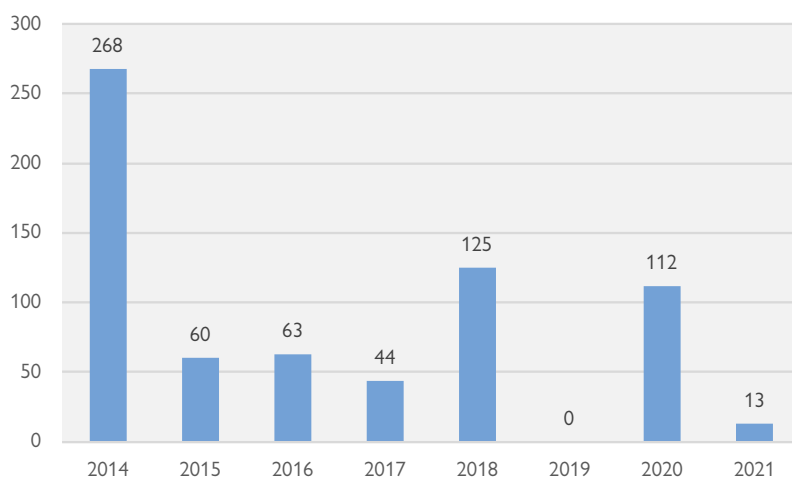


Figure 1: Total number of reported deaths during migration in Southern Africa by year

While the reduction in documented deaths in 2021 might seem significant (see figure 1), it is in fact more likely to be linked to the lack of accurate and reliable data since there are no official sources of data on this issue. It is imperative to highlight that MMP data rely heavily on media reports, which typically centre around large-scale episodes of deaths and disappearances of migrants. In effect, when deaths occur in smaller numbers, they likely go undetected and unrecorded. However, random episodes recorded in recent times provides a plausible reason to presume that there are episodes of deaths and disappearances that are likely to happen unnoticed and unrecorded in the region. Data from the National Statistics Office of Comoros points to the fact that many Comorians also attempt the dangerous crossing to Mayotte every year. In 2021, as many as 63 were reported dead or missing while trying to cross to Mayotte.

Of the data available between 2014 and 2021, a total of 116 people who died or went missing were males, 17 were females and 15 were minors, while the demographic information of 543 people is unknown. The countries where these deaths and disappearances primarily occurred are the Democratic Republic of Congo (304), Mozambique (174), Comoros (78), Zimbabwe (38) and Zambia (33). While the cause of death for more than 600 cases recorded are unknown, an overview of the causes of death based on available data revealed that the majority of reported cases were drownings (17), followed by vehicle accidents or linked to hazardous transport (12) and sickness or lack of adequate healthcare (11). Some reported deaths were accidental (7), or as a result of violence (6) with the remaining four episodes recorded pointing to harsh environmental conditions, lack of adequate food, shelter, or water. However, given the challenges to collect data on missing migrants in the region, these figures must be interpreted as the minimum estimate of the real number of lives lost. These challenges are explained in detail in the next section.

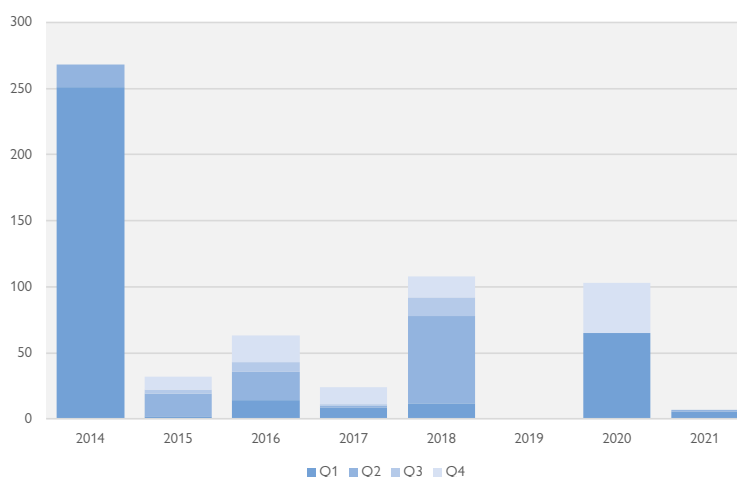


Figure 2: Total number of reported deaths in Southern Africa by quarter, 2014-2021

The most documented form of irregular migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa is the one involving crossing the Limpopo river to South Africa. While crossing the river, people also face the risk of being swept away by its currents. While complete data on the number of people who have died while attempting to cross the Limpopo river do not exist, IOM's Missing Migrants Project has recorded 21 cases of people who drowned while attempting the crossing between 2014 and 2021. Those who manage to reach the South African side of the Limpopo river have to then cross the electrified fence that runs along the border. These observed risks pose so much threat to the fate of these vulnerable migrants and their families. Migrants entering South Africa through the Limpopo province attest to the dangers of this crossing:

“A woman who was crossing into South Africa was travelling with her husband, his younger brother and his three children. When they were in the middle of the river, they were swept away by the water. But they managed to pull each other and their children across. However, six adults in the group were swept away. Two had babies on their backs. They were never seen again.” (IOM, 2021)

Also, according to IOM's Flow Monitoring Surveys in Southern Africa, most irregular migrants cross the Lake Victoria region and Tété, however, due to the extremely high number of drowning incidents recorded in recent years, local and national authorities have been assigned to set out enforcement measures to manage the crises by putting port police and officers to serve as watchdogs in the region. It is also known in the region that between Mozambique and Zimbabwe, most people migrating irregularly make use of the Manica-Mutare Point of Entry (PoE) between Mozambique and Zimbabwe and Zobue-Mwanza POE between Mozambique and Malawi with the ultimate hope of reaching South Africa. Notwithstanding the dangers associated with irregular crossing due to the presence of dangerous wildlife, including crocodiles, people cross the Limpopo River, in the vicinity of the Beitbridge official border point. These observed high mobilities areas align with the above evidence that most of the deaths recorded were located in Mozambique (29%) and Zimbabwe (18%).

While data on migrant deaths in the Southern Africa region is quite limited, anecdotal and qualitative reports shed light on additional risks people face on the move in the region. A key informant dialogue with some relevant government stakeholders in the region revealed that some migrants drown on their journeys due to capsizing of unregistered and rickety boats used to cross rivers, such as the Zambesi; episodes of attacks from crocodiles to those crossing flooded rivers have also been widely cited as conventionally known threats to people on the move in Southern Africa. The popular crossing area between Beitbridge in Zimbabwe and Musina in South Africa has been cited as a dangerous one wherein people have been threatened and sometimes fatally attacked by crocodiles in the river. Armed robbery, as well, is not uncommon in the Beitbridge area. Episodes of mugging by robbers commonly known as “amagumaguma,” operating within the migration routes in Zimbabwe have also been widely cited. Additionally, episodes of sexual abuse and exploitation against women and girls on the move are not uncommon in the region.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) counts migrant fatalities only at the external borders of a state or during the process of migrating towards an international destination. In the Southern Africa region, the data collection challenges and gaps are immense. MMP collects data through official sources such as medical examiners and local authorities; nongovernmental civil society organizations and focal points in IOM country offices; and media monitoring. Collecting data on migrant deaths and disappearances remains challenging in the region due to the lack of official reporting on the deaths of non-nationals in transit, and when available, data are often incomplete. This data collection methodology presents some limitations in terms of consistency and comparability of data given the availability of sources of data and information.

The main source of MMP data in the region are testimonies of migrants who witnessed deaths, which used to be collected through surveys by the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi). However, this source of information has not been available since 2020. The second most used information source in the region is traditional media, yet the high number of languages and low rates of digitalized media within Africa render collecting data from media reports very challenging. Migrant

deaths incidents found in the media are always further investigated by the MMP, about 40 per cent of these incidents have been verified by government authorities, IOM missions, or other international organizations. These data sources provide insight into the pattern of human mobility and the likelihood of recording incidents of missing migrants on the uncharted routes used by migrants. A new data source in 2022 will be IOM's mixed migration study and the stocktaking assignment in the southern Africa region which has questions on missing migrants addressed to participating stakeholders to gauge their understanding of the subject and to solicit data where appropriate.

Region/ Route	Official Sources	Civil Society Organizations/ Intergovernmental Organizations	Multiple Media Sources	Single Media Source
Land routes in Southern Africa	0%	42.9%	14.2%	42.9%
Comoros to Mayotte	0%	0%	0%	100%
DRC to Uganda	0%	100%	0%	0%

Figure 3: MMP data sources by route and by source, 2014-2021

FAMILIES OF MISSING MIGRANTS IN ZIMBABWE AND SOUTH AFRICA

The deteriorating political and socioeconomic situation in Zimbabwe has led thousands of people to leave the country irregularly over the last decades, with many attempting to reach South Africa. Countless may have gone missing on these journeys but the exact numbers are not known, as there is a lack of systematic and reliable data on the number of people who go missing during migration on this route. A recent study – [Families of Missing Migrants: Their Search for Answers and the Impacts of Loss](#) by the Missing Migrants Project – found that the lack of clearly identifiable and accessible search mechanisms meant that most families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe did not know where to start or whom to contact when their loved ones went missing.

Most families who participated in the research suffered ongoing psychological anguish, including trauma and depression as a result of not knowing what happened to their relatives. Some families were stigmatized in their communities, as the disappearance of their relatives was interpreted by the community as a failure to fulfil their responsibilities. Women were disproportionately affected by stigma following the disappearance of a husband, as it was often interpreted by their family and community as linked to relationship problems caused by the wife, which often led to stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours towards wives and children of missing migrants.

The development of a national multi-pronged strategy to address missing migrant cases would create a holistic response to the needs of families and to Zimbabwe's commitments under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and existing legal provisions that protect the rights of missing migrants and their families.

Based on the findings of this and the [Family Needs Assessment Study](#) conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) assessing the needs of the families of missing Zimbabwean migrants the Missing Migrants Project works with the ICRC in the Southern Africa region to address the challenges faced in identifying migrant remains and attending the needs of the families of the missing. These efforts have led to Zimbabwe incorporating questions on missing migrants in its 2021 Population and Housing Census. In addition, oversight committees have been established in both Zimbabwe and South Africa including relevant government authorities working in areas linked to missing migrants. Currently, the two organizations are developing an advocacy tool to sustainably support authorities working on the issue of missing migrants at the policy level.

CONCLUSION

Irregular migrants in Southern Africa are exposed to series of risks, including natural hazards, utilization of unsafe means of transportation, exploitation, and abuses at different stages of their migratory journeys. While many of these risks common on irregular routes around the world, others – such as crocodile attacks – are unique to the countries in the Southern African region.

Notwithstanding the relative importance of the data collected by the Missing Migrants Project, existing data on migrant deaths in Southern Africa lacks sufficient spatial and temporal coverage as it is not complete, frequent in the collection, and timely to inform policy. In terms of quality, oftentimes, data collected also lacks accuracy. In some cases, available data is not easy to use as it is not accessible and interoperable. Also, in ensuring that all ethical and safety requirements are met, it is difficult for data to be impartial, confidential, and appropriate for analysis. Insufficient data on missing migrants – due to a lack of official data on the issue and the challenges inherent to documenting irregular migration – poses a challenge for providing accurate information that can be used for informed decision making.

These observed issues with data on migrant deaths can be partly attributed to the lack of appropriate infrastructure to mobilize state and non-state institutions that collect data on migration. This has motivated the global calls to improve migration data made on numerous occasions in national, regional, and international fora, such as in the Global Compact for Migration's Objective 8, which commits signatory states to "save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants" and SDG Indicator 10.7.3 on the "number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination." Despite these international commitments, much remains to be done to improve data on missing migrants in the Southern Africa region and beyond. Ultimately, this evidence must be used by States to provide humanitarian support, prevent further migrant deaths and to provide safe, legal routes for people on the move. There is a need for a systematically developed and established bilateral and multilateral cooperation and coordination among countries of origin, transit and destination, in order to enhance data quality on missing and dead migrants; provide humanitarian support to families of missing migrants, and respond to operational needs within and beyond the Southern African Development Community (SADC) .



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