

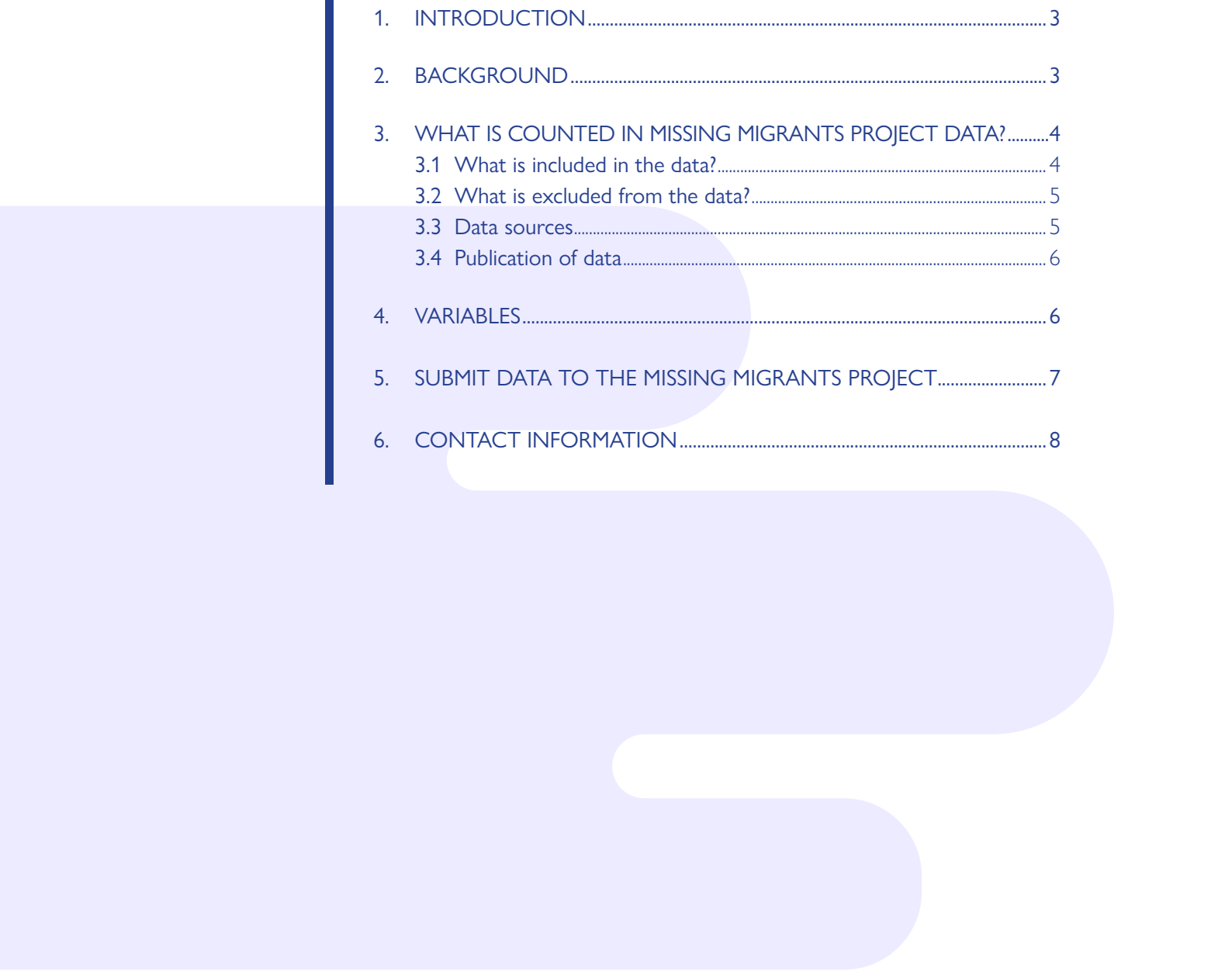
# MISSING MIGRANTS

## TRACKING DEATHS ALONG MIGRATORY ROUTES

# Data Collection Guidelines

English version last updated  
1 August 2020





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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Missing Migrants Project monitors and counts migrants who have died at state borders or in the process of migrating to an international destination. It was developed in response to the multiple deaths and disappearances of migrants identified along migratory routes around the world. Today, the project hosts the only existing database on the deaths of migrants globally. It has become a key reference for information on migrant deaths, including being used to inform the Sustainable Development Goals Indicator 10.7.3 on the “[n]umber of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination.”<sup>1</sup> Missing Migrants Project’s work also supports Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which calls on states to “[s]ave lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants.”

Despite calls at the international level for work to address the issue of migrant deaths and disappearances, there is still a need to expand and improve data coverage and completeness in most regions of the world. As such, Missing Migrants Project data are best understood as a minimum estimate of the true number of lives lost during migration.

This document defines the Missing Migrants Project’s methodological framework to serve as a guide for institutions interested in contributing relevant data, such as medical examiners, police departments, immigration authorities, as well as non-governmental actors working with migrants. For this reason, this document provides background information on IOM’s Missing Migrants Project data and describes the definitions and variables used for data collection. The main objective of these guidelines is to improve data collection within the Missing Migrants Project framework and thus to increase awareness about migrant fatalities in underreported regions globally.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Missing Migrants Project (MMP) began in the wake of the tragic events of October 2013, in which an estimated 368 migrants died in the sinking of two boats near the Italian island of Lampedusa.<sup>2</sup> In response, the Missing Migrants Project was created as a joint initiative of the IOM’s Global Migration Data Analysis Center in Berlin and IOM’s Media and Communications Division in Geneva.

The Missing Migrants Project has recorded thousands of deaths each year since it began collecting data in 2014, indicating a need for the continuation and expansion of data collection on this issue in order to better understand migrant deaths and to assist those left behind. Since 2014, more than 35,000 men, women, and children have died during migration, including more than 20,000 who have drowned in the Mediterranean. Data on migrant fatalities is challenging to collect for several reasons. For one, as many deaths during migration are of migrants travelling by irregular means, they often occur in remote areas chosen with the aim of evading detection. As a result, bodies are not always found quickly, if at all, and deaths may not be reported to authorities. Furthermore, often when deaths occur at sea, many bodies are not recovered, and without passenger lists, the precise number of missing persons is unknown. In addition, the irregular context might make survivors fearful of reporting deaths, and some migrant deaths may even be actively covered up.

Data on migrant deaths and disappearances is also challenging to collect as consistent reporting on the deaths of non-nationals in transit (by transit and destination countries), or of nationals who have died while in transit abroad (by countries of origin) is very scarce. Few official sources collect and publish data on migrant deaths. Often incidents come to light through media sources, which may have incomplete, infrequent or even incorrect coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> See for example [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013\\_Lampedusa\\_migrant\\_shipwreck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Lampedusa_migrant_shipwreck).

Moreover, data on missing migrants tends to over represent parts of the world where there is better media coverage and official reporting of deaths, such as the Mediterranean or the United States' southern border with Mexico. Comparatively few data on migrant deaths are recorded in areas of the world with large volumes of irregular migration, despite the many dangers migrants face in these regions. For example, some experts believe that more migrants die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>3</sup>

In order to overcome these challenges, the Missing Migrants Project aims to strengthen existing data sources and partnerships with relevant state and humanitarian agencies in order to address data gaps across Africa, Asia and Latin America, where there is little information on the risks faced during migration. These regions have been identified by IOM staff as areas of concern since they have high levels of migration but little or no systematic collection of data on the dangers migrants face during their journeys at the national or regional level. Better data collection in these regions will lead to an improved understanding of the conditions migrants face before reaching more visible routes. Improved data will also allow for a more robust regional comparison, and will bring to light the differences and similarities in the challenges individuals face when migrating on various routes. More importantly, the aim of IOM's Missing Migrants Project is to raise awareness of these challenges and risks and ultimately, for migration to be safe for all.

“Irregular migration is defined as the movement that takes place outside the laws, regulations or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination. There is no clear or universally accepted definition of irregular migration. From the perspective of destination countries, it is entry, stay or work in a country without the necessary authorization or documents required under immigration regulations. From the perspective of the sending country, the irregularity is for example seen in cases in which a person crosses an international boundary without a valid passport or travel document or does not fulfil the administrative requirements for leaving the country.”

Source: IOM Glossary on Migration, 2019

## 3. WHAT IS COUNTED IN MISSING MIGRANTS PROJECT DATA?

There is no universally accepted definition of “missing migrants,” but IOM's Missing Migrants Project uses a working definition which includes migrants who have died at the external borders of states, or in the process of migration towards an international destination, regardless of their legal status. The data includes only those migrants who die during their journey to a country different from their country of residence.

### 3.1 What is included in the data?

The database includes deaths and disappearances of migrants who die in transportation accidents, shipwrecks, violent attacks, or due to medical complications during their journeys. It also includes bodies found near border crossings that are categorized as migrants based on their belongings and/or the characteristics of the 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 illicit 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, crossing a border fence, etc. While the location and cause of death can provide strong evidence

<sup>3</sup> See for example: RMMS (2016) Forgotten Fatalities in North Africa. Available from [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/4mi\\_Mixed\\_Migration\\_Monthly\\_Summary\\_June\\_2016.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/4mi_Mixed_Migration_Monthly_Summary_June_2016.pdf).

that an unidentified decedent should be included in Missing Migrants Project data, this should always be evaluated in conjunction with migration history and trends.

## 3.2. What is excluded from the data?

The count excludes migrant deaths which do not occur during migratory journeys. This means deaths that occur in immigration detention facilities, during deportation, or after forced return to a migrant's homeland, as well as deaths more loosely connected with migrants' irregular status, such as those resulting from labor exploitation are not included in the Missing Migrants Project dataset. Migrants who die or go missing after they are established in a new home are also not included in the data, so deaths in refugee camps or housing are excluded. The deaths of internally displaced persons who die within their country of origin are also excluded.

This approach is chosen because deaths that occur at physical borders and during migration help to inform about the risks and dangers migrants face during the journey along different migration routes. Data and knowledge of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by migrants in destination countries, including deaths, should not be neglected, but rather tracked as a distinct category.

Disappearances of migrants are not included in Missing Migrants Project data unless there is reliable evidence that the person died, such as when their remains are found or when someone is reported lost at sea. No data disaggregating missing persons reports by migratory status is currently available from any actor, and media sources do not typically report such cases. The Missing Migrants Project's working definition of "missing migrant" starts from the perspective of those discovering, reporting or managing the deaths, rather than that of the families with whom missing migrants have lost touch.

## 3.3 Data sources

The Missing Migrants Project currently gathers information from diverse sources such as official records – including from coast guards, border police and medical examiners – and other sources such as media reports, NGO records, and surveys and interviews of migrants. Data for all regions are drawn from a combination of sources, including media and grassroots organizations. In all regions, Missing Migrants Project data represent a minimum estimate of the number of migrant deaths.

In the Mediterranean region, data are relayed from relevant national authorities to IOM field missions, who then share it with the Missing Migrants Project team. Data are also obtained from IOM and other organizations that receive survivors at landing points in Italy, Greece and Libya. Data collected by NGOs – particularly search and rescue organizations and NGOs running emergency hotlines for migrants in distress at sea – provide valuable information when there are limited official data sources. In areas where there is no NGO presence, local news reports are also a useful source of information on migrant deaths and disappearances. IOM and UNHCR also regularly coordinate to validate data on missing migrants in the Mediterranean.

When people die while migrating in Europe, the MMP team is often notified by IOM country offices that are in contact with the local authorities managing the cases. The high attention paid to irregular migration on the continent means that local media also often report deaths, which are verified by secondary sources whenever possible.

IOM defines a migrant as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of:

- (1) the person's legal status;
- (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary;
- (3) what the causes for the movement are;
- (4) what the length of the stay is.

Source: IOM Glossary on Migration, 2019

Data on the United States-Mexico border are compiled based on data from county medical examiners, coroners and sheriff's offices in the United States, as well as media reports for deaths occurring on the Mexico side of the border. Estimates within Mexico and Central America are based primarily on media and year-end government reports.

In the absence of official, systematic and intraregional information sources in Asia, data on migrant deaths are drawn from reports by UNHCR and NGOs, as well as media reports. MMP also relies on surveys with migrants conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre's Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) to capture incidents involving fatalities, and NGOs and other humanitarian actors who report deaths on militarized borders in the Middle East.

In Africa, MMP relies primarily on data gathered through the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi initiative. Other sources of data include media reports and accounts from IOM country offices.




### 3.4 Publication of data

The Missing Migrants Project hosts both an internal database and an anonymized database which is made public on its website, available at [missingmigrants.iom.int](https://missingmigrants.iom.int). The internal database includes identifying information of the deceased, such as names, countries of origin, and notes on the circumstances of death, in the interest of answering requests from families searching for relatives lost during migration. However, in line with IOM data protection standards and in the interest of respecting the dead and their families, potentially identifying information, including names and countries of origin, is removed from the public database.

## 4. VARIABLES

This section presents the list of variables that constitute the Missing Migrants Project database. Ideally all incidents recorded should include entries for each of these variables. The minimum information necessary to register an incident is the date of incident,<sup>4</sup> the number of dead and/or number of missing, and the location of death. If further information is unavailable, leave blank or write "unknown" as indicated in the table below.

**Table 1:** List of variables needed for input to Missing Migrant Project Database

Variable Name	Description
 <b>Date of incident</b>	Estimated date of death. In cases where the exact date of death is not known, this variable indicates the date in which the body or bodies were found. In cases where data is drawn from surviving migrants, witnesses or other interviews, this variable is entered as the date of the death as reported by the interviewee. At a minimum, the month and the year of death is recorded.
 <b>Number of dead</b>	The total number of people confirmed dead in one incident, i.e. the number of bodies recovered. If no bodies have been recovered and all migrants are missing and presumed dead, leave this variable blank.
 <b>Number of missing</b>	The total number of those who are missing and are thus assumed to be dead. This variable is generally recorded in incidents involving shipwrecks. The number of missing is calculated by subtracting the number of bodies recovered from a shipwreck and the number of survivors from the total number of migrants reported to have been on the boat. This number may be reported by surviving migrants or witnesses. If no missing persons are reported, leave blank.

<sup>4</sup> An "incident" is defined as any occurrence in which an individual or group of individuals dies during migration or at international borders in one particular place and time.

	<b>Number of survivors</b>	The number of migrants that survived the incident, if known. The age, gender, and country of origin of survivors are recorded in the 'Comments' variable if known. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Number of males</b>	Indicates the number of males found dead or missing. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Number of females</b>	Indicates the number of females found dead or missing. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Number of children</b>	Indicates the number of persons under 18 found dead or missing. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Age of deceased</b>	The age(s) of the deceased. An estimated age range may be recorded. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Name</b>	Name(s) of the deceased, in cases in which the identity is known. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Nationality</b>	Nationality(ies) of the deceased. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Cause of death</b>	The determination of conditions resulting in the migrant's death i.e. the circumstances of the event that produced the fatal injury. If unknown, write "unknown" and the reason why. For example, "Unknown – skeletal remains only", would be used in cases in which only the skeleton of the decedent was found. Other examples of causes of death are: "Drowning", "Hypothermia", "Violent robbery" or "Vehicle accident".
	<b>Location description</b>	Description of place where the incident involving deaths /disappearances occurred or where the body or bodies were found. Include nearby towns or cities and geographic coordinates if possible.
	<b>Migration route</b>	Name of the migrant route on which incident occurred, if known. This can be either a known route (e.g. 'Central Mediterranean' or a start and end location (e.g. Mexico to United States). If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Body taken to</b>	Location where body(ies) are taken to for autopsy or storage. Typically a medical examiner, coroner, hospital or similar. If unknown, leave blank.
	<b>Information source</b>	Name of source of information for each incident. Multiple sources may be listed.
	<b>Link to information source</b>	Links to original reports of migrant deaths / disappearances. Multiple links may be listed.
	<b>Comments</b>	Brief description narrating additional facts about the death or sources of information. If no extra information is available, this may be left blank.

## 5. SUBMIT DATA TO THE MISSING MIGRANTS PROJECT

In order to submit data to the Missing Migrants Project, please download and complete the form [here](#) with any incidents involving migrant deaths and send it as an attachment to [MissingMigrants@iom.int](mailto:MissingMigrants@iom.int). If you wish to submit a report of a single incident involving a migrant death/disappearance, please send us an email using [this form](#). The data will be reviewed by IOM staff for accuracy and verified with relevant actors before being added to the dataset.

## 6. CONTACT INFORMATION

To contribute data to the Missing Migrants Project or for questions about this document, please write to [MissingMigrants@iom.int](mailto:MissingMigrants@iom.int).

