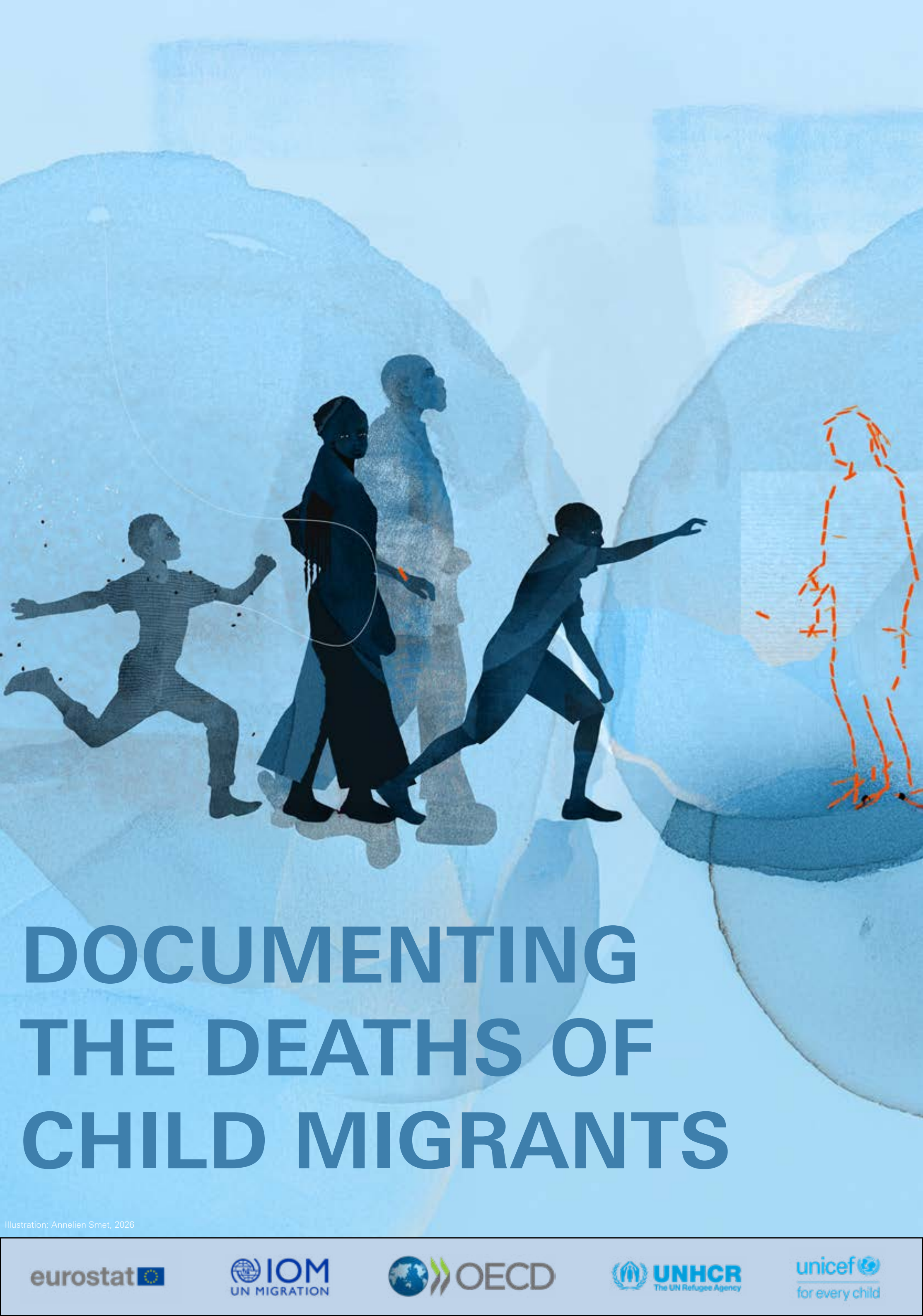




DOCUMENTING THE DEATHS OF CHILD MIGRANTS

Illustration: Annelien Smet, 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication was produced by the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) and co-funded by the European Union. The International Organization for Migration led the project in coordination with its fellow IDAC Secretariat members: Eurostat, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Secretariat Chair.

© International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2026.

Suggested citation: Andrea García Borja, International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, Documenting the Deaths of Child Migrants, International Organization for Migration, Berlin, 2026.

Design by: Ritika Asher

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the members of the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC). Neither the European Union nor IDAC members can be held responsible for them.

About the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move

The International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) is a cross-sectoral global coalition that aims to improve data and statistics and support evidence-based policymaking for migrant and displaced children. With the European Union as its main donor and jointly led by Eurostat, IOM, OECD, UNHCR and UNICEF (Secretariat Chair), IDAC brings together governments (including experts from national statistical offices and migration- and displacement-related ministries), international and regional organizations, NGOs, think tanks, academics, civil society and youth.

Contact us at IDAC@unicef.org

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [YouTube](#)





INTRODUCTION

Every year, countless children die along perilous migration routes, yet the scale of these tragedies remains uncertain. Since 2014, IOM’s Missing Migrants Project has documented 4,414 child migrant deaths globally—a figure that minimizes the true death toll of child migrants. The many challenges linked to documenting missing migrants in general mean that IOM’s figures underestimate deaths during migration, and the lack of recovery and identification of remains means that age-disaggregated data is unavailable in the vast majority of documented cases. This two-fold challenge underscores the urgent need to improve the documentation of these deaths. Understanding the dimension of the issue is the first step to protecting children on the move.

This paper describes the current landscape of data on child migrant deaths, explains the challenges inherent in capturing accurate figures, and introduces the potential of mortality records as a vital tool for closing the knowledge gap. Addressing these issues lays the groundwork for stronger, evidence-based responses to one of the most pressing humanitarian concerns of our time.

CURRENT DATA LANDSCAPE AND CHALLENGES TO DOCUMENTING CHILD MIGRANT DEATHS

The Missing Migrants Project (MMP) of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has documented fatalities during migration journeys for over a decade. The Missing Migrants Project tracks migrants, regardless of their legal status, who have died at states' external borders or during migration to a country other than their own. Data is collected from several sources, including governmental actors, such as coast guards, medical examiners, coroners, and law enforcement agencies. Incidents are identified through both social and traditional media worldwide and are verified by local IOM staff whenever possible. Additional information is gathered from UN field staff and international as well as local NGOs working with migrants. Surveys and interviews with migrants also contribute valuable data.



IOM 2024 / Karla García Conde

Between 2014 and 2025, IOM recorded almost 81,000 migrant fatalities, of which 4,414 are known to be children.¹ Collecting reliable data on migrant fatalities is especially difficult due to the circumstances in which these deaths occur. Thousands of migrants, including children, travel irregularly through remote and dangerous routes where deaths often go unreported or unnoticed. Additionally, fear among survivors, involvement of criminal networks, and the challenges of recovering bodies—especially at sea—mean that countless deaths remain undocumented. These data gaps are most pronounced in regions with high migration flows but limited official reporting. The absence of systematic reporting by authorities and the frequent lack of demographic details, such as age, further obscure the true impact on children.

Given that data are scarce, challenging to collect, of varying quality, and in most cases, even the most basic demographic information about the deceased is missing, it is nearly impossible to accurately assess the risks and numbers of child fatalities during migration. In the MMP dataset, 55.5% of all recorded fatalities (44,862 individuals) lack information on the victims' age or age group, while 39% (31,706 individuals) were identified as adults and 5.5% (4,414 individuals) as children.² These figures are minimum estimates of the true scale of deaths of children during migration.

¹ Source IOM's Missing Migrants Project, data updated on 24 February 2026. Accessible at: missingmigrants.iom.int/data

² Throughout this briefing, "children" are defined as those younger than 18 years old where specific age data is available, though in many recorded cases decedents are only described as a "child" or an "infant" with no further details available.

TWO FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE DATA GAP ON CHILD MIGRANT DEATHS

First, the "missing figure" refers to child migrant deaths that have gone completely unrecorded. The challenges to documenting migrant deaths are partly related to the increasing securitization of migration, which shifts States' focus away from human security during migration³ and forces people to travel on remote migration routes to evade detection. As a result, deaths go unnoticed or unreported, and the remains are unlikely to be recovered. Furthermore, the politicization of irregular migration results in extremely scarce official reporting on this topic. For example, only 18 per cent of all fatalities recorded by MMP were documented using information from governmental actors.

Second, the "hidden figure" refers to the deaths of child migrants that are recorded but are not categorized as such. In fact, more than half of all fatalities (44,862 individuals) in MMP data lack information on age, meaning the deaths of countless child migrants may be concealed within the data. There is evidence to suggest that children are underrepresented among these 44,862 deaths. Drowning cases, which account for 36,626 individuals with unknown ages, are particularly concerning. Anecdotal evidence shows that children are often kept below deck during sea crossings, making them more vulnerable to hazards like toxic fumes and increasing their risk of being trapped and unable to escape during shipwrecks.⁴

³ McAuliffe, M., 2020. *Immobility as the ultimate "migration disrupter" - An initial analysis of COVID-19 impacts through the prism of securitization.* Migration Research Series N° 64. International Organization for Migration (IOM). Geneva.

⁴ Pickering, S. and B. Cochrane, 2013. Irregular border-crossing deaths and gender: Where, how and why women die crossing borders. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17(1):27–48.

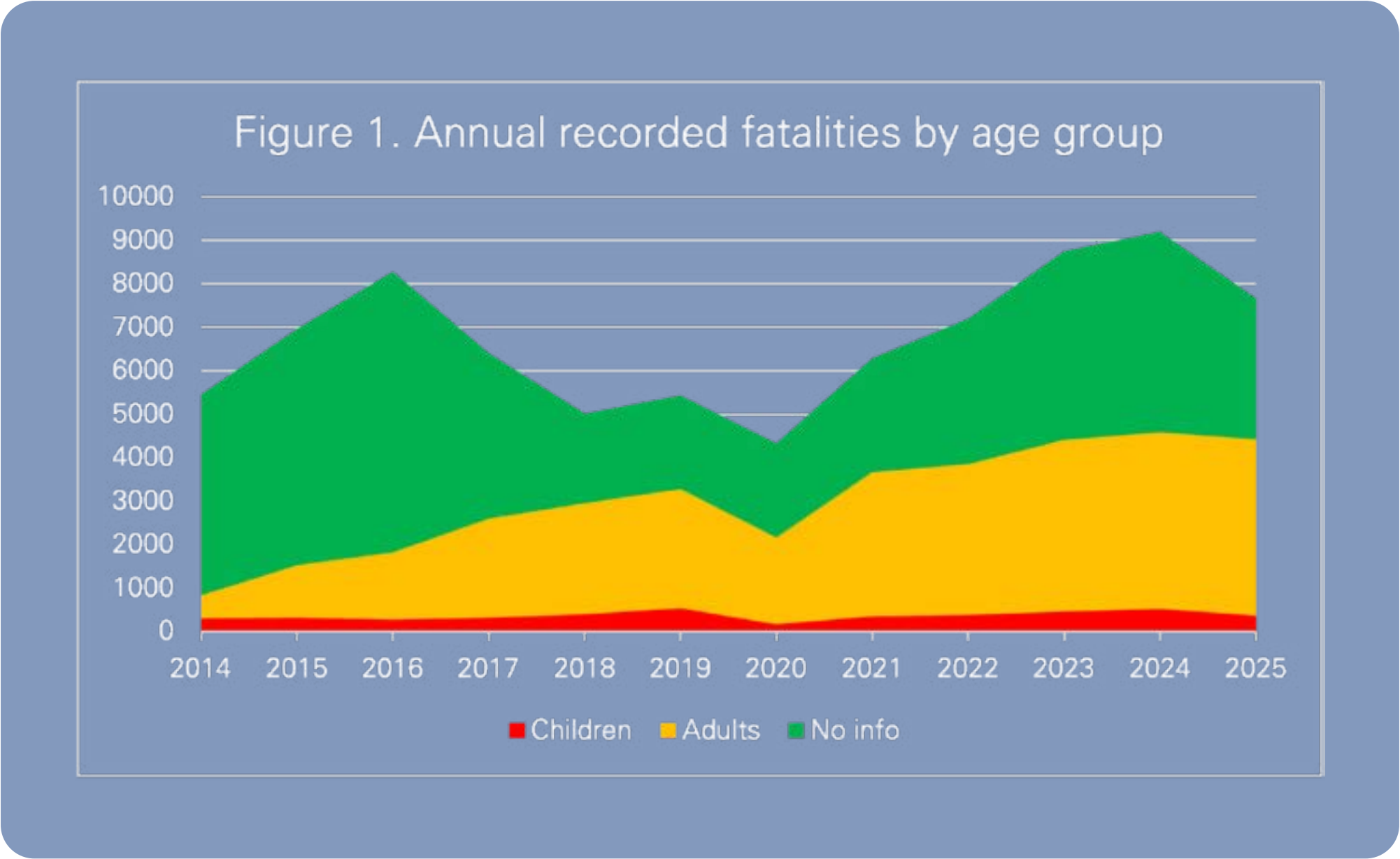


DATA INSIGHTS & PITFALLS

THE INVISIBILITY OF CHILD MIGRANT DEATHS PERSISTS ACROSS TIME

The available data on child migrant deaths are highly incomplete and do not match the overall trends in migrant fatalities across time. As shown in Figure 1, the number of child migrant deaths remains fairly constant across time, while the overall number of fatalities has varied across the years. The year-on-year fluctuations of overall migrant fatalities reflect current migration trends,

but also data availability and monitoring constraints. The consistency in year-on-year figures of child migrant deaths is likely attributable to persistent gaps in data regarding the ages of deceased migrants. As a result, despite advancements in documenting overall migrant fatalities, child deaths during migration often remain unreported and largely invisible.



INCOMPLETENESS OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA BY MIGRATION ROUTE

While for most migration routes the percentage of child migrant deaths is below 10 per cent, six routes stand out with higher proportions: the Belarus-EU border with 28 per cent; the Naf River crossing and the Syria to Türkiye land crossing with 23 per cent respectively; the Eastern Mediterranean with 21 per cent; and the English Channel and the Darien National Park crossings with 14 per cent respectively. This could reflect higher proportions of children traveling on these routes or the heightened risks children face on these routes compared to adults. However, data from routes that are known to be extremely hazardous, such as the Central Mediterranean and the Atlantic Route to the Canaries, both with very low percentages of child migrant deaths, show that this might not be the case.

According to the most recent available data, in 2024,⁵ 19 per cent of all arrivals in Italy and Malta were children. Meanwhile, only 2 per cent of all fatalities recorded on the Central Mediterranean Route in 2024 were children. Similarly, while 10 per cent of all arrivals in Spain in 2024 were children, only three per cent of all fatalities recorded on the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands were children. This shows that data on fatalities are illustrative of a lack of demographic information on those routes—and in particular the invisibility of child migrant deaths—rather than the composition of the migration flows.

5 [UNHCR, UNICER, IOM, 2025, Migrant and refugee children via mixed migration routes in Europe. Overview of trends – 2024.](#)

Deaths of child migrants in the Eastern Mediterranean

On September 2, 2015, a 2-year-old boy from Syria drowned while he and his family were trying to cross the Eastern Mediterranean. A photo of his lifeless body washed ashore made international headlines and became a symbol of the humanitarian crisis of migrant deaths. Three other young children died in the same incident, including his brother. However, their deaths went largely unnoticed, like most of the 636 child migrant fatalities that MMP has recorded since 2014 on the Eastern Mediterranean Route, one of the routes with the largest share (21%) of child migrant deaths.

While the deaths of child migrants are disproportionately visible and cause international outrage when captured in an image, the broader issue remains undocumented, invisible, and thus unattended.



Map

COMPLETENESS OF THE AGE DEPENDS ON THE SOURCE

The Missing Migrants Project collects data on migrant deaths from hundreds of sources. These can be broadly categorized into media, witness and survivor reports, data from NGOs and international organizations, and official data. The source category also influences the completeness and accuracy of the data. Official data—generally recorded by forensic medical examiners’ offices or law enforcement agencies—offers the most complete demographic details of deceased migrants. Still, 47 per cent of fatalities recorded from official sources do not include any demographic details of the deceased, and only 18 per cent of all recorded deaths originate from official sources.

A higher proportion (60%) of deaths reported through witnesses’ and survivors’ testimonies include demographic details, as those reported by official sources. When documenting the deaths of child migrants, testimonies from fellow travelers are key. While only 11 per cent of all fatalities were recorded through witness testimonies, a larger proportion (16%) of child migrant deaths have been documented through them. This is probably because children are more likely to be identified as such by co-travelers—whether families and friends or other migrants they met during the journey—than by third parties reporting on their deaths, such as the media. Typically, data coming from the media and from NGOs are the most inaccurate and incomplete in demographic details. For example, often media reports just refer to the victims as “child” without any further details on their age.

CLOSING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP ON CHILD MIGRANT DEATHS

Using mortality records to uncover the hidden figure

Given that forensic identifications are rarely conducted for people who die during migration, their demographic details are mostly inferred based on their physical features and the items they carried. This leads to significant knowledge gaps regarding the profiles of those who die during migration and obscures specific vulnerabilities. For example, in data coming from sources other than forensic records, the deaths of infants and

young children are more likely to be reported as child migrant deaths than those of young migrants (15 to 18 years old),⁶ because younger children are more easily recognized as such, as their physical features more clearly indicate their age. As a result, the “hidden figure” of the deaths of migrant youth in the available data is likely larger than the “hidden figure” of child migrant deaths.

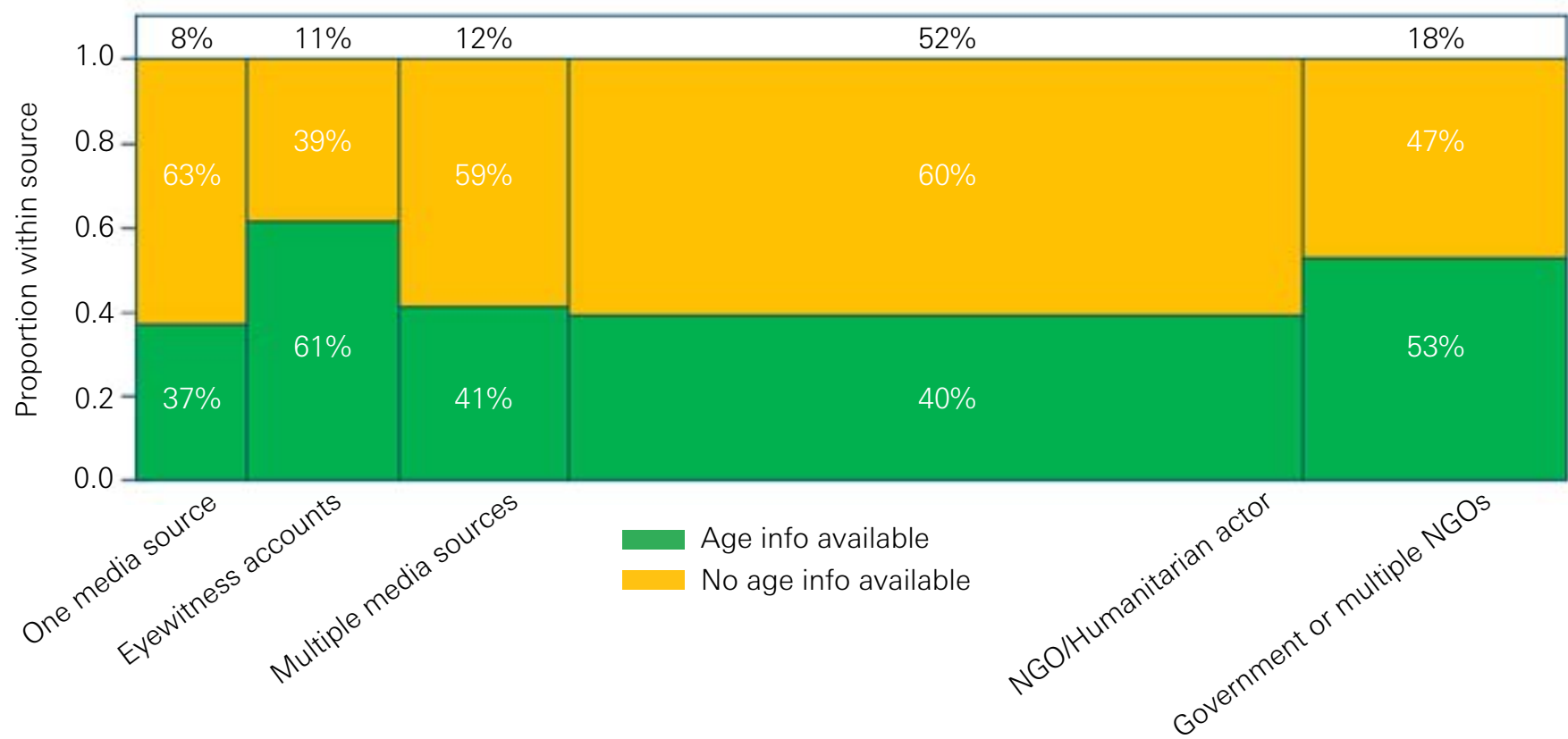
⁶ The United Nations defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 years, while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as anyone under 18 years old. This creates an overlap where individuals aged 15 to 18 are considered both children and youth. This overlap can complicate statistical analysis.

Given the specific challenges of documenting the deaths of child migrants, working with official mortality records—which offer the most comprehensive and accurate demographic data on deceased migrants—would be the best way to reduce the current data gaps. Mortality records are a rich and mostly untapped source of information for quantifying deaths during migration. As mentioned above, only 18 per cent of all IOM’s data on migrant deaths originates from official sources, and of the 4,414 deaths of child migrants recorded globally in the past decade, only 820 come from official sources. To document deaths during migration with mortality records, it is necessary for these records to specify whether the deceased individual—identified or not—was a migrant.

The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Arizona has developed an anthropological approach to identify people who die during their migration journeys. PCOME refers to this category as ‘Undocumented Border Crossers’ (UBC), referring to migrants who die attempting to enter the U.S. in an undocumented manner and applying both to identified and unidentified remains. PCOME uses information from consulates and the US Border Patrol, the location of death, and the biological and cultural profiles of the deceased—the latter consisting of personal effects, dental health, and cultural accoutrements—to determine whether an individual was a UBC.⁷ Better documentation of child migrant deaths in mortality records could be improved through a similar approach, especially in locations that experience large migrant flows.

7 Reineke, R. C, 2016. Naming the Dead: Identification and Ambiguity Along the U.S.-Mexico Border [PhD thesis]. The University of Arizona, United States of America.

Figure 3: Proportion of recorded migrant fatalities and availability of data on age by source type



Given that currently only very few mortality records globally classify decedents as migrants, there have been some efforts to retroactively classify mortality records by migration status on well-known migration routes. The Vrij Universiteit in Amsterdam examined death certificates to identify ‘border deaths’ in Spain, Gibraltar, Italy, Malta, and Greece from 1990 to 2013 for their Deaths at the Borders Database.⁸ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) updated this database to cover until 2019 in their Counting the Dead report.⁹

However, this approach is highly resource-intensive and consequently poses limitations in terms of scalability and ethical challenges related to the personal and professional well-being of researchers conducting such work.

Disaggregating mortality records by migration status, including refugee status, whether at issuance or retroactively, would provide considerably more complete information on the demographic profiles of deceased migrants. Therefore, it is especially well-suited to uncover the “hidden figure” of child migrant deaths in reported fatalities, specifically those of older children and youth, if the forensic autopsy includes age determination.

8 Vrij Universiteit in Amsterdam. The Human Cost of Border Control. [Death at the Borders Database](#).
9 ICRC, 2022, [Counting the Dead. How registered deaths of migrants in the southern European sea border provide only a glimpse of the issue](#).

Statistical estimation of the missing figure

However, mortality records do not solve the second challenge of documenting the deaths of child migrants, whose remains are never found. One of the few available solutions to this challenge is to produce statistical estimates of the real number of migrant deaths, and deaths of child migrants specifically. Multiple systems estimation (MSE) is a widely employed method in the social sciences to estimate the size of hard-to-reach populations. The MSE methodology uses three or more lists that count individuals in a specific group to estimate the size of the entire population. These lists are compared to identify overlaps, that is, individuals captured in more than one list. Subsequently, a mathematical model is applied to estimate the number of individuals not recorded in any of the lists. For social issues, the lists are often made by actors, such as law enforcement agencies, humanitarian or non-profit agencies, and service providers; and usually not for the purpose of creating estimates.

MSE has been used to estimate the population size of other hidden populations, for example, in UN estimates of victims of trafficking¹⁰ and by the Colombian Truth Commission for estimating deaths in the Colombian conflict.¹¹ However, until now, there is only one published study, by Farcomeni in 2022, which estimates the total number of migrant fatalities in the Mediterranean by employing MSE and regression-extrapolation techniques.¹² Further applications of MSE to the topic of missing migrants are necessary to evaluate if it is a suitable method for estimating the “missing figure” of child migrant deaths.

¹⁰ UNODC, 2022. Monitoring human trafficking prevalence through multiple system estimation.

¹¹ [Human Rights Data Analysis Group, Data integration and statistical estimation: A collaboration with the Colombian Truth Commission \(CEV\) and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace \(JEP\)](#)

¹² Farcomeni, A., 2022. How Many Refugees and Migrants Died Trying to Reach Europe? Joint Population Size and Total Estimation. *The Annals of Applied Statistics*, 16, 2339-2351.

Since all statistical estimates are built on existing data, mortality records disaggregated by migration status would provide a valuable additional data source. However, it is essential to consider the ethical dimensions of producing an estimate of child migrant deaths and the potential to cause harm to this highly vulnerable group. Specifically, the research methodology and the communication of the estimates should be considered.

The research design and methodology should include safeguards for children and their families, aiming to protect children’s safety, best interests, and well-being. There are specific guidelines, such as the UNICEF Guidelines for Ethical Research involving Children,¹³ that should be used for this purpose. At the same time, transparency in the estimation methodology is crucial. This means clearly stating what data was used, what assumptions were made, and what limitations were present; to allow for replicability and helps others understand and evaluate the estimate’s validity. Given the possibility of severely under- or over-representing reality, estimates should be peer reviewed before being published.

Additionally, the results must be communicated with care to avoid a misleading presentation. Estimates should always be presented as a range rather than a specific figure, provide confidence intervals, and report death tolls with prefixes such as “at least” or “at the most” to prevent false certainty. Transparency extends to how findings are communicated to different audiences. Policymakers and the public may not read technical appendices, so the main report or press release must embed the caveats in plain language. Finally, the possibility of misrepresentation or politicization of the estimates should be considered before publication.

¹³ [Okyere, S. 2019. Ethical considerations surrounding research on missing migrant children. In *Fatal Journeys Volume 4: Missing Migrant Children* \(pp. 87-97\), IOM.](#)





IOM 2022 / Alejandro Cartagena

CONCLUSION

Reliable data on child migrant deaths is essential for informed policymaking, enabling more effective humanitarian efforts and the creation of targeted protection strategies for child migrants, including refugees, unaccompanied minors, and other highly vulnerable groups. Without a clearer picture of the risks and circumstances children face during migration journeys, efforts to prevent future tragedies and protect vulnerable lives are hindered.

There are two main challenges to improving the documentation of child migrant deaths. First, the “missing figure,” which refers to child migrant deaths that go entirely unrecorded, and second, the “hidden figure” of migrant deaths that are recorded but lack demographic details to identify them as children. The following recommendations could help provide the solid evidence needed to craft meaningful policies and responses that protect the lives and rights of children undertaking dangerous migration journeys.

