



Deaths in the Channel – what needs to change

January 2025

“The loss of life in the Channel this year has been the highest on record, and that is because more pressure is being put on the gangs, the boats are being overloaded and there is more anarchy on the beaches in France.”

Dame Angela Eagle, Minister of State for Border Security and Asylum
House of Commons, November 2024

Summary

- 2024 was the deadliest year on record for people crossing the Channel as at least 69 people died.
- But there is no official Government data published confirming the numbers or providing any information about the people who have died.
- The UK Government seems to have accepted that enforcement action against the smuggling gangs has made the journeys more dangerous. But there have been no announcements on improving search and rescue in the Channel.
- There is also a need to learn from the United States and implement safe and legal routes alongside enforcement action to reduce the number of people making the crossing.

Recommendations

- 1) The UK Government should publish quarterly data on the number of people who have died trying to cross the Channel in a small boat. This should include, where known, information including age, sex and nationality. This should be done jointly with the French Government.
- 2) The UK Government must prioritise saving lives as part of the strategy for reducing irregular journeys. This must include:
 - a. as part of the ongoing cooperation with the French Government, clear plans for reducing the lives lost at sea by improving search and rescue operations. This should include additional funding focused on saving lives.
 - b. commitments to search and rescue and saving lives being added to the list of priorities for the Calais Group in 2025.
- 3) The UK Government should set out a clear plan for reviewing and expanding safe and legal routes to the UK, including:
 - a. making a clear commitment on refugee resettlement to return, at a minimum, to the levels of arrivals pre-Covid and maximising the potential for more community sponsorship pathways.

- b. expanding eligibility for refugee family reunion by changing the immigration rules to allow child refugees in the UK to sponsor close family members to join them.
- c. piloting a refugee visa that would allow 10,000 people from high grant countries to travel to the UK to have their asylum claims processed.

Deaths in the Channel

In 2024, at least 69 men, women and children died crossing the English Channel in a small boat, trying to reach the UK. Each of those deaths is a tragedy. Behind each of those numbers is a person who had friends and family, hopes and aspirations, fears and worries. The number of people dying in 2024 was far higher than in 2022, despite fewer people having crossed.¹

Many, but not all, of the deaths are reported in the British media. As 2024 progressed and the number of deaths increased, there was a danger of the loss of life becoming normalised; an acceptance that this is something that happens. The statements in response became interchangeable, and the news focus swiftly moved on.

Annual recorded deaths and channel crossings

| Year | Recorded deaths | Channel crossings |
|------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 2021 | 32 | 28,526 |
| 2022 | 5 | 45,744 |
| 2023 | 12 | 29,437 |
| 2024 | 69 | 36,816 |

Source: International Organization for Migration, Missing Migrants Project: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>; Home Office Irregular Migration Statistics, year ending September 2024, table Irr_D01 and Home Office transparency data, Small boat activity in the English Channel. Data correct as of 31 December 2024. Recorded deaths for 2024 include three deaths on 29 December 2024 that weren't recorded in the IOM data at the time of extraction. • Created with Datawrapper

There is also no official data published on the number of people who die trying to reach the UK. While data has occasionally been released in response to parliamentary questions or Freedom of Information requests, there are no regularly released statistics.

There are, on the other hand, daily updates on the number of people and boats who have crossed, weekly updates on the number of people prevented from crossing, quarterly detailed datasets that include demographic information about who has crossed, and other ad hoc publications.¹

The best publicly available source is produced by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as part of their wider Missing Migrants Project. The Missing Migrants Project relies on a range of sources to collate the data, in particular press releases from the French Maritime

¹ This was particularly the case during the parliamentary passage of what became the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

Prefect of the Channel and the North Sea, French and UK media reports, and reports by local organisations.

According to the IOM, during 2024 66 people have died while trying to cross the Channel to reach the UK.ⁱⁱ A further three people were reported to have died on 29 December 2024, an incident that wasn't recorded in the IOM's statistics at the time of writing, bringing the total to 69.ⁱⁱⁱ Information released to Sky News via a Freedom of Information request showed that according to Home Office figures 67 people had died making the crossing as of 8 November this year.^{iv}

The IOM are only able to collect detailed information about who the people who lost their lives are – where they're from, their age or their gender – when it's covered in those data sources. In the majority of deaths in 2024 that information was not available.

Where it is available, a third of deaths were of children. That includes a baby who died on 17 October.^v It has been reported that women and children are often placed in the middle of the boats, which is meant to reduce the risk of them falling over the edge but puts them at greater danger if the boat gets into difficulty.

“When you see these flimsy boats, the way that it's women and kids who get put in the middle of the boats, so when the boat folds, they are the people who get crushed, who end up drowning.”

Yvette Cooper, Home Secretary, Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg, 15 December 2024

| | Deaths |
|-------------|---------------|
| Adult Men | 16 |
| Adult Women | 7 |
| Children | 12 |
| Unknown | 34 |

Source: International Organization for Migration, Missing Migrants Project: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data> • Created with Datawrapper

The information on the nationalities of those who died is also rarely available. Where it is, it reflects the available data on the nationalities of people who reach the UK coming across the Channel. This includes countries such as Syria, Eritrea and Sudan, which along with Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, account for two-thirds of all crossings since the start of 2021.^{vi}

Enforcement is making Channel crossings more dangerous

The journey across the English Channel in a small boat has always been perilous. But in 2024 it became more deadly. The 69 deaths in 2024 are more than the total between 2019 and 2023, during which time 59 people died.

There have been no official investigations into why the proportion of people dying in the Channel grew so significantly. But the Home Office's data shows the average number of people per boat has increased. In 2022, there were an average of 41 people on each boat that reached the UK. This increased to 49 people in 2023 and 53 people in 2024.^{vii}

As well as more people being on each boat, the boats themselves are reportedly increasingly unseaworthy and are setting off from a widening area along the French coast. The change is almost certainly a result of UK and French government attempts to disrupt the criminal gangs who profit from the dangerous journeys and the focus on enforcement as the principal way of doing this.

The Home Office seems to have accepted this. In a news story on the department's website following the deaths of 12 people on 3 September 2024 – most of whom were women and children – it was said that the tragedy highlighted “the increasingly extreme measures the gangs are willing to contemplate, as more people are crammed into less seaworthy vessels.” It added:

“Intelligence reveals smugglers have also increased the price they charge for migrants to cross the Channel, including charging for children to get into boats, as the business model comes under pressure from UK and partner law enforcement.”^{viii}

In November, Dame Angela Eagle, the Minister of State for Border Security and Asylum, told the House of Commons: “The loss of life in the Channel this year has been the highest on record, and that is because more pressure is being put on the gangs, the boats are being overloaded and there is more anarchy on the beaches in France.”^{ix}

Despite the link between increased enforcement and the rise in deaths being accepted, there has been no public statement from the UK Government regarding any plans to mitigate that impact. The new Government has focused on disrupting the criminal gangs further, but the various statements and policy documents since the election have not mentioned plans to, for example, bolster search and rescue capacity along the French coast.

While the Home Office has said some of the money previously earmarked for the Rwanda scheme will now go towards funding the new Border Security Command, it is not clear if any additional money has been set aside for increasing search and rescue capacity. Similarly, the Priority Plan on Countering Migrant Smuggling for 2025 published in December 2024 by the Calais Group, which brings together the governments of the UK, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, does not include saving lives as one of the five priorities.

The importance of data

There is consensus that the number of people risking their lives by getting in small boats needs to be reduced. Having reliable and transparent data is vital for designing the policies that will achieve that aim and for monitoring any consequences of actions taken, including those that are unintended.

The lack of an official source of data on the people who die crossing the Channel, how it happened, and the reasons for why they were trying to reach the UK creates an evidence gap. While the previous Government did commission Sir Ross Cranston to run an inquiry into the events of 24 November 2021 when at least 27 people died attempting to cross the Channel, it is limited to focusing on that tragedy. Examining the reasons why the number of people dying has increased is, therefore, not part of the inquiry's remit.^x

The data the Government does publish about the people who survive the crossing is consistent in showing that every year the majority of people come from the same six countries: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Sudan and Syria.

Top nationalities for people crossing the channel in small boats

| Rank | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024* |
|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1 | Iran | Albania | Afghanistan | Afghanistan |
| 2 | Iraq | Afghanistan | Iran | Vietnam |
| 3 | Eritrea | Iran | Turkey | Iran |
| 4 | Syria | Iraq | Eritrea | Syria |
| 5 | Afghanistan | Syria | Iraq | Eritrea |
| 6 | Vietnam | Eritrea | Syria | Sudan |
| 7 | Sudan | Sudan | Sudan | Iraq |

Source: Home Office Irregular Migration Statistics, year ending September 2024, table lrr_01. *2024 data up to end of September. • Created with Datawrapper

Enforcement only one side of the coin

To date, the new Government's approach to small boat crossings has been to focus on enforcement. Suggestions that there should be more safe and legal alternatives created to give people other options have generally been dismissed by Ministers:

"I strongly do not think [expanding safe and legal routes] is an alternative to going after the criminal gangs and the work needed to do in law enforcement to prevent the small boat crossings."

Yvette Copper MP, Home Secretary, Home Affairs Select Committee, 17 December 2024^{xi}

Yet evidence from the United States regarding the impact of the Biden administration's policies shows that safe and legal routes and enforcement are two sides of the same coin. The Biden administration implemented a range of safe and legal routes, such as the sponsorship process for Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan nationals to enter the United States, alongside restrictions on entry at the Mexican border.

In a recent paper the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) found that the mixed approach has significantly reduced the number of irregular entries to the United States, particularly for nationals who have access to a safe route. According to MPI, the number of "irregular

encounters” at the United States border with Mexico reduced from a monthly average of 200,000 in 2022 and 2023 to 54,000 in September 2024.

Based on the evidence from the United States, MPI warned against thinking that safe and legal routes should only follow once enforcement measures have taken effect. Instead, enforcement approaches need to be implemented alongside safe and legal routes. As MPI found, “it was the application of these measures together—creating a viable alternative to irregular migration—that generated an effective shift in calculus for many migrants.”

As part of the “shift in calculus”, MPI highlighted the importance of the “bold increases in the scale of regular pathways” that were implemented by the Biden Administration. Nearly 532,000 people have arrived through the sponsorship process and more than 24,000 new refugee resettlement places were created.^{xii} Importantly, they found that there were larger falls in irregular arrivals for nationalities who could access the new safe and legal routes.

In seeking to draw lessons from the United States’ experience that can be applied in Europe, MPI conclude that:

“Ultimately, a blend of enforcement and legal pathways—together with strong partnerships and support for capacity building and integration in neighbouring and transit countries—offers the best prospects for reducing irregular migration and a worthy rival to the slick smuggling architecture.”

Conclusion and recommendations

At least 69 people lost their lives trying to reach the UK in 2024. We may never know all of the personal stories behind those tragedies, but there should be no acceptance that the deaths are collateral damage in tackling the smuggling gangs. Taking on the gangs is one of the necessary actions needed to reduce the number of people putting their lives at risk to reach the UK, but the Government seems to have accepted that it is leading to the journey becoming more dangerous. Steps must be taken to improve the search and rescue capacity in the Channel, particularly close to the French coast.

Having accurate and robust evidence is also a vital part of designing effective policies. Yet there is no accurate information being collated or published by either the UK or French governments on how many people are dying in the Channel and who those people are.

There is a risk that 2025 continues to see an increase in deaths as more action is taken to enforce the UK’s border without also addressing the reasons why people are willing to put their lives at risk in the first place. The new Government is yet to set out a clear strategy for safe and legal routes, or to recognise the evidence from the United States about the role they play in reducing irregular journeys. Doing so should be a priority for the Government in 2025, alongside ensuring that anyone who does reach the UK and applies for asylum is given a fair hearing with the right advice and support in place.^{xiii}

Recommendations

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- 2) The UK Government must prioritise saving lives as part of the strategy for reducing irregular journeys. This must include:

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ⁱ In 2022, 5 people died in crossing the Channel and 45,744 people crossed. In 2024, 69 people died and 36,816 crossed. See table on page 2 of this report for more detail.

ⁱⁱ This is based on Refugee Council analysis of IOM’s data, based on the deaths classified as being due to drowning. For this report, Refugee Council changed the IOM classification of the cause of death relating to two incidents. On 15/9/2024 eight people died as they tried to reach the UK. IOM classified these deaths as due to “harsh environmental conditions/lack of adequate shelter, food, water.” Based on the media reports of the incident, we have classified those deaths as due to drowning. On 27 October 2024, one person died and IOM has classified this as due to “sickness/lack of access to adequate healthcare”. Based on reports, we also classified this as due to drowning.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Three migrants die trying to cross Channel in boat from France to UK <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/three-migrants-die-trying-cross-channel-boat-france-uk-2024-12-29/>
- ^{iv} At least 270 people have died in UK awaiting asylum application decisions since 2015, figures show <https://news.sky.com/story/at-least-270-people-have-died-in-uk-awaiting-asylum-application-decisions-since-2015-figures-show-13274740>
- ^v Baby dead and dozens rescued in Channel sinking <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly50n1v420o>
- ^{vi} Home Office Irregular Migration statistics, year ending September 2024, table Irr_D01
- ^{vii} Home Office Irregular Migration statistics, summary tables year ending September 2024
- ^{viii} 'Home Secretary sets out 'moral imperative' to stop smuggling gangs' <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-sets-out-moral-imperative-to-stop-smuggling-gangs#:~:text=The%20tragedy%20of%20the%20French,died%20were%20women%20and%20children.>
- ^{ix} House of Commons debate, Urgent Question on Small Boat Crossings, Wednesday 6 November 2024, Volume 756, Column 311 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-11-06/debates/77B1E99D-C873-49E1-9EB9-B6F57C0B939C/details>
- ^x The Cranston Inquiry was commissioned by the then Transport Secretary Mark Harper. More detail can be found on the inquiry's website: <https://cranston.independent-inquiry.uk/>
- ^{xi} Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: The work of the Home Office, HC 505, Tuesday 17 December 2024 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15167/pdf/> ,
- ^{xii} See Legal Pathways and Enforcement: What the U.S. Safe Mobility Strategy Can Teach Europe about Migration Management <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/lessons-us-safe-mobility-strategy-europe>
- ^{xiii} See our report *Rescue, Recovery and Reform: Towards an effective asylum system* <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/rescue-recovery-and-reform-towards-an-effective-asylum-system/>