

Security risks in the Darien Gap and assistance needed among migrants

This infographic presents the latest 4Mi data on the dangers and abuses that migrants interviewed by 4Mi experienced in the Darien Gap, and the assistance needed. This document aims to contribute towards a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of migrants in the region.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION SITES:

Paso Canoas and Ciudad Neily (Costa Rica and Panama border); San Carlos and Heredia (central Costa Rica)

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD:

January 1 - December 31, 2023

METHODOLOGY:

In-person surveys

SAMPLE SIZE:

900 respondents


Background

- The Darien Gap is a vast area of tropical rainforest that extends across both sides of the border between Colombia and Panama. It lacks infrastructure and is heavily controlled by criminal groups, exposing those in transit to risks of death, abuse, and diverse dangers.
- Mixed migration through the Darien Gap is increasing. While 248,284 people on the move crossed this border irregularly in 2022, the number rose to 520,085 by 2023 (+110%). In 2023, 63% of the migrants who crossed the Darien Gap were of Venezuelan nationality, 17% from other South American countries, 9% from Caribbean islands, 8% from Asia, and 2% from Africa.¹
- Restrictions imposed by countries in the region in 2023 to discourage irregular migration have not decreased the number of migrants on the move but have increased their exposure to dangers and abuses during the journey.²
- In 2023, Costa Rica declared a state of emergency in response to the country's migratory situation, attributed to the heightened presence of temporary and permanent migrant populations within its borders.³

Respondents profiles

Sex distributions of respondents



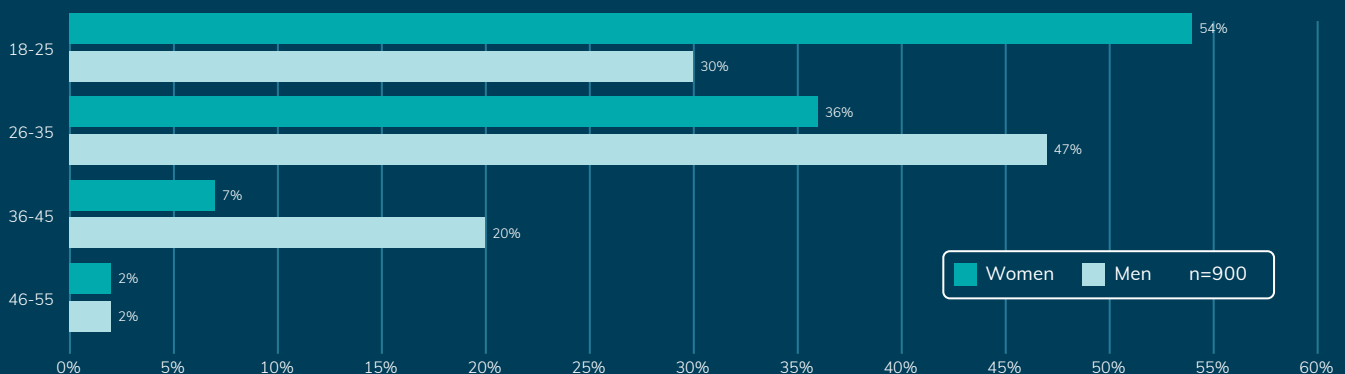
 **29%** of respondents were traveling with children in their care at the time of the interview.

Profiles

- **43%** of respondents were in the **26 to 35 years** age range).
- More than half of the respondents were of Venezuelan nationality (60%); 23% were Colombian, 8% Ecuadorian, 4% Cuban, 3% Peruvian, and 2% Haitian.

Note: The 4Mi sample is purposive. Data presented in this snapshot cannot therefore be considered as representative of the mixed migration dynamics through the Darien Gap.

Age distributions of respondents



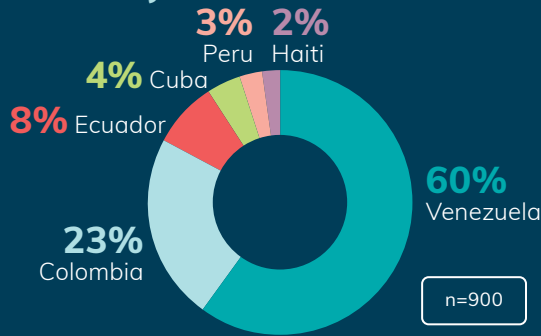
1 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.). [Estadísticas – Tránsito irregular por el Darién 2022 y 2023](#).

2 Human Rights Watch (2023). ["This Hell Was My Only Option" Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darién Gap](#) (Chapter 3).

3 Voz de América (2023). [Costa Rica declarará emergencia nacional ante flujo de migrantes](#).

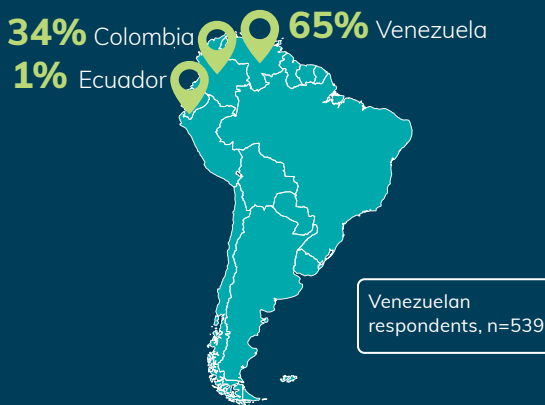
Respondents Profiles

Nationality

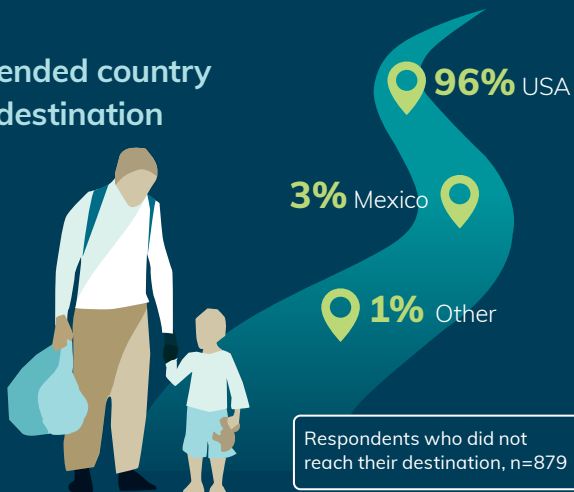


The proportions of respondents by nationality broadly correspond to the current composition of registered entries in Panama from the Darien Gap in 2023.⁴

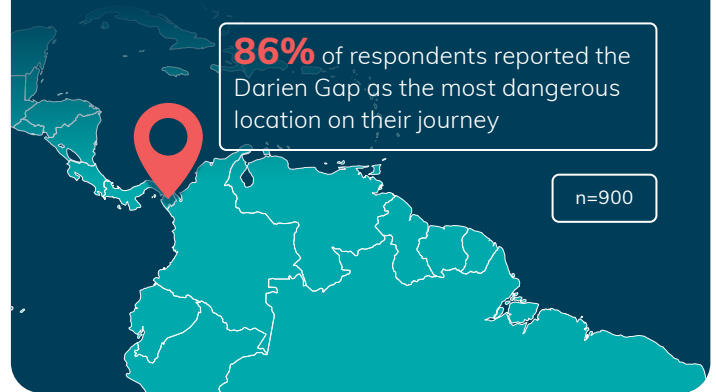
Where Venezuelans' journeys began



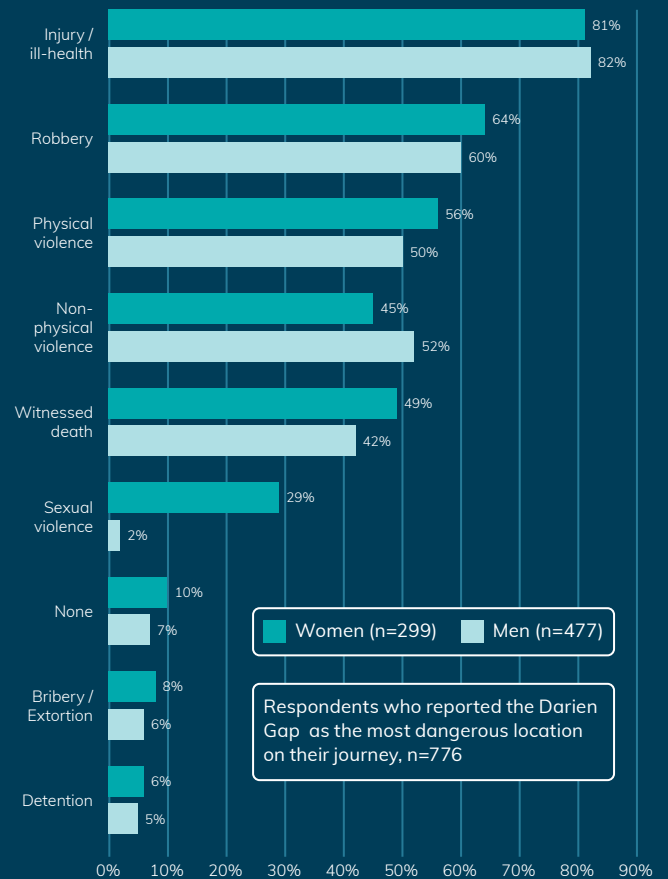
Intended country of destination



The most dangerous location reported along the journey



Abuses and dangers experienced during the journey in the Darien Gap, by sex



Respondents who reported the Darien Gap as the most dangerous location on their journey, n=776

Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

Key findings

- The Darien Gap remains the most dangerous place on the journey, with 91% of respondents having experienced there at least one incident, most commonly injuries, robberies and physical violence. Most of them report having suffered these incidents on the Panamanian side of the Darien.⁵
- Experiences of incidents increased in 2023 compared to 2022. 29% of women surveyed experienced sexual violence (an increase of 14 percentage points compared to the previous period in July-September 2022)⁶, 45% of respondents witnessed the death of other migrants or the presence of deceased bodies (+24pp), and 62% of respondents suffered robberies (+19pp). These risks are associated with a higher presence of criminal gangs along the routes crossing the Darien Gap.⁷
- In line with the alarming figures related to sexual violence, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) issued an alert about “massive events of sexual violence” in the Darien region in recent months.⁸

⁴ National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.). [Estadísticas – Tránsito irregular por el Darién 2023](#).

⁵ Turkewitz, J. [‘A Ticket to Disney?’ Politicians Charge Millions to Send Migrants to U.S.](#), The New York Times.

⁶ Mixed Migration Centre (2022). [Safety risks in the Darien Gap and assistance needed among refugees and migrants](#).

⁷ Human Rights Watch (2023). [‘This Hell Was My Only Option’ Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darién Gap](#).

⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières (2023). [Tapón del Darién: alertamos sobre eventos masivos de violencia sexual](#).

Reported perpetrators of abuses in the Darien Gap



88%

Local Community



53%

Armed groups



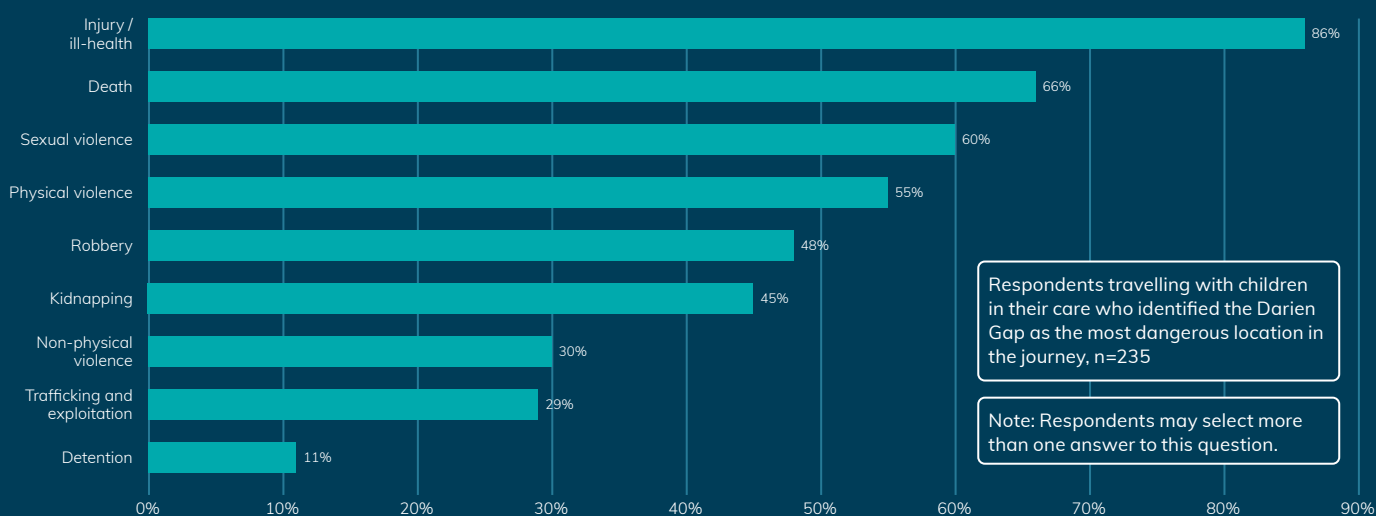
19%

Other migrants

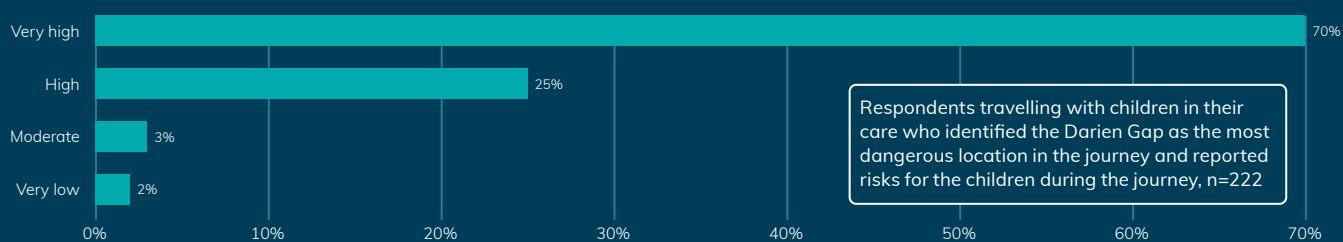
Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

Children on the move across the Darien Gap

What were the main risks for children travelling in the Darien Gap?



What was the level of exposure of children to these risks?



Key findings

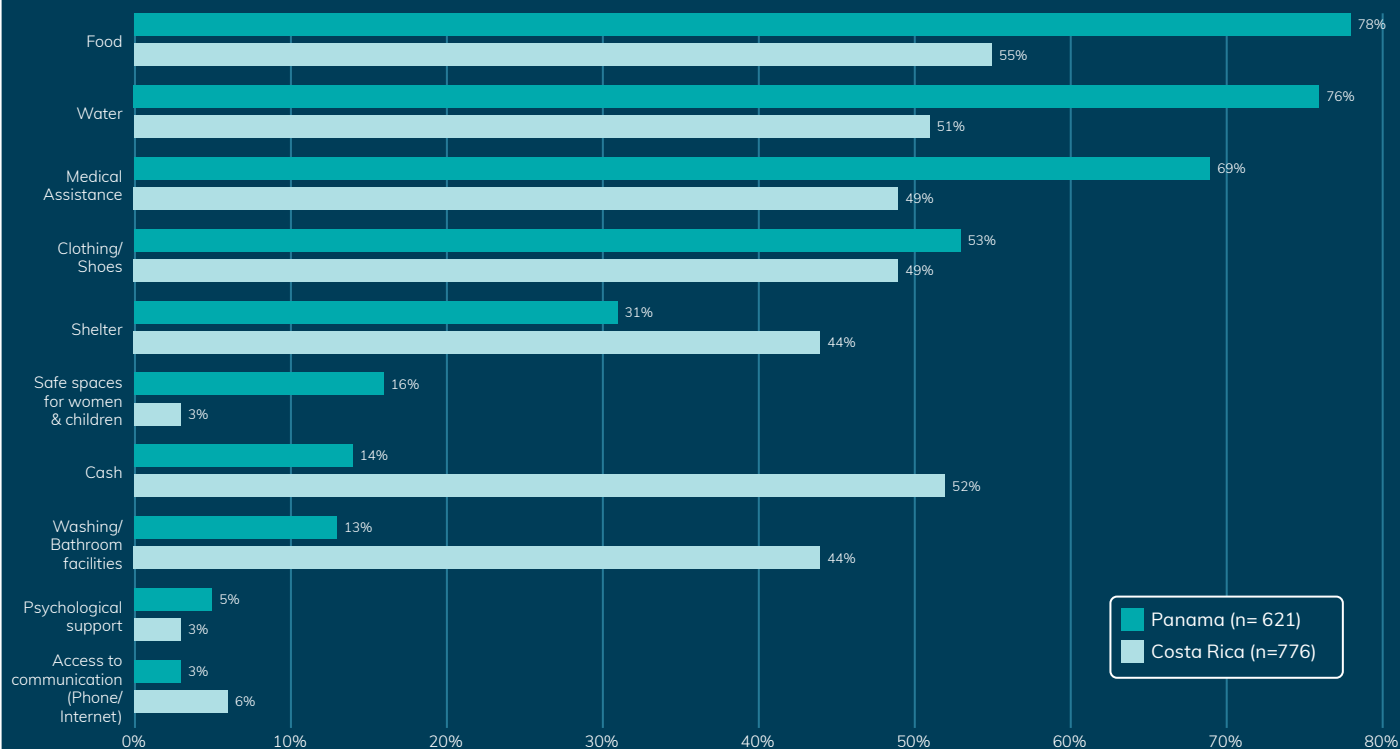
- **Around two-thirds of migrants travelling with children** through the Darien Gap said that children were exposed to the risks of death and sexual abuse in the Darien, alongside a range of other serious risks.
- **Humanitarian organizations have warned about the increase of unaccompanied children** travelling through the Darien Gap.⁹
- **84% of the surveyed caregivers** indicated that the children and adolescents in their care during the journey faced risks in the Darien Gap, including **injuries, diseases, death, and sexual violence**.
- Sexual violence was more often reported as a risk for children by surveyed caregivers in 2023 (**60%** of the surveyed caregivers who identified risks for children in their care during the journey) than in 2022 (**36%**).¹⁰
- **80%** of all surveyed caregivers mentioned **that the children in their care had a high or very high level of exposure to risks in the Darien**. According to results published by MMC LAC and UNICEF Honduras in November 2023, unaccompanied children are even more vulnerable to dangers along the route in the Americas.¹¹

9 UNICEF (2023). [Child alert: Child migration in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

10 Mixed Migration Centre (2022). [Safety risks in the Darien Gap and assistance needed among refugees and migrants](#).

11 Mixed Migration Centre (2023). [Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras](#).

Humanitarian assistance needed by migrants in Panama and Costa Rica



Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

- **Food and water are the main reported unmet needs in the Darien region.** Due to lack of economic resources and the geographical context of the area, some migrants run out of food and water during their journey along the Darien Gap.¹²
- **Medical assistance remains one of the main reported unmet needs,** especially in Panama. Dehydration, injuries to hands and feet, physical exhaustion, and chronic malnutrition are still reported by the surveyed migrant population upon exiting the Darien Gap.¹³
- The second most mentioned need in Costa Rica was cash, mainly reported by respondents to cover transportation, food, and water expenses to finance the onward journey.¹⁴
- **Four out of five respondents reported needing additional humanitarian assistance** at the time of the survey in Costa Rica. Food, cash, and water were the main reported unmet needs. The difference in the percentage of people reporting shelter and access to bathrooms between Costa Rica and Panama highlights the attention gap in these sectors in the first country.



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4Mi data collection

4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi



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12 Pappier, J. (2023). [How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas](#). Human Rights Watch.

13 See: Acción Contra el Hambre (2023). [Acción contra el Hambre activa su respuesta humanitaria en la región del Darién con el enfoque puesto en la salud materna-infantil](#) & IOM (2023). [Meet Etzaida: A Humanitarian Frontline Worker Transforming Lives in the Darien](#).

14 The New York Times (2023). [Traslados en autobuses: así responde Centroamérica al flujo migratorio](#).