

Protection risks, perpetrators and safety measures for Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees and migrants in Djibouti

Djibouti annually sees the arrival and transit of tens of thousands of Ethiopians as well as thousands of Eritreans, most of whom are traveling along the Eastern Route to the Arabian Peninsula.¹ This route is considered to be 'unique in its precarity' in terms of the degree of trafficking and exploitive smuggling dynamics² and other protection violations including physical and sexual abuse, harassment and discrimination, detention and even death.³ This snapshot, produced in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), delves deeper into the protection challenges that people face while on the move in Djibouti, the perceived perpetrators and the safety measures that refugees and migrants put in place. It aims to inform the advocacy and programming activities of protection actors in Djibouti.

Key findings

- Nearly half (48%) of respondents had personally experienced protection incidents during their journey, with robbery, physical violence, injuries/ill-health caused by harsh conditions and sexual violence being the predominant incidents.
- 60% of women respondents had personally experienced protection incidents, with 43% of Ethiopian women reporting they had experienced sexual violence.
- 54% of respondents identified places inside Djibouti as dangerous. Tadjoura, Guellileh, Dhikil and Ali Sabieh were the most frequently identified.
- Sexual violence, physical violence and injury or ill health due to harsh conditions were perceived to be the main risks for children on the move in Djibouti.
- When examining the data on perceptions together with direct experiences, sexual violence appears at a markedly high rate.

- To protect themselves from crime and abuse along the journey, the majority of Eritrean respondents (87%) travel in groups and avoid carrying cash (50%), while Ethiopian respondents more often say they hide valuables (75%) and avoid large cities (59%).
- Food, water, clothing and shelter were the main assistance needs of respondents.

Data and profiles

This snapshot presents insights from 512 surveys conducted between July and August 2023 with Ethiopians (386) and Eritreans (126) who arrived in Djibouti less than two years before the interview, as per 4Mi's targeting strategy. The interviews were conducted in Obock (51%) and Djibouti Ville (49%). Among the respondents, 75% were Ethiopian and 25% were Eritrean nationals. Nearly all (99%) Eritreans were interviewed in Obock; 64% of Ethiopians were interviewed in Djibouti Ville and 36% in Obock. While most Ethiopians outlined that their preferred destinations were on the Arabian Gulf (68%), indicating plans for onwards movement eastward, most Eritreans cited preferred destinations in North America (53%) or Europe (31%), suggesting they may be waiting for legal pathways out of Djibouti.

1 IOM (2023). [Djibouti — Migration Trends Dashboard \(November 2023\) | Displacement Tracking Matrix](#)

2 Ravenstone Consult (2023). [Captive commodities: "This route is like a fire"](#)

3 MMC (2019). [Everyone's prey](#)

Figure 1. Profile of respondents (n=512)

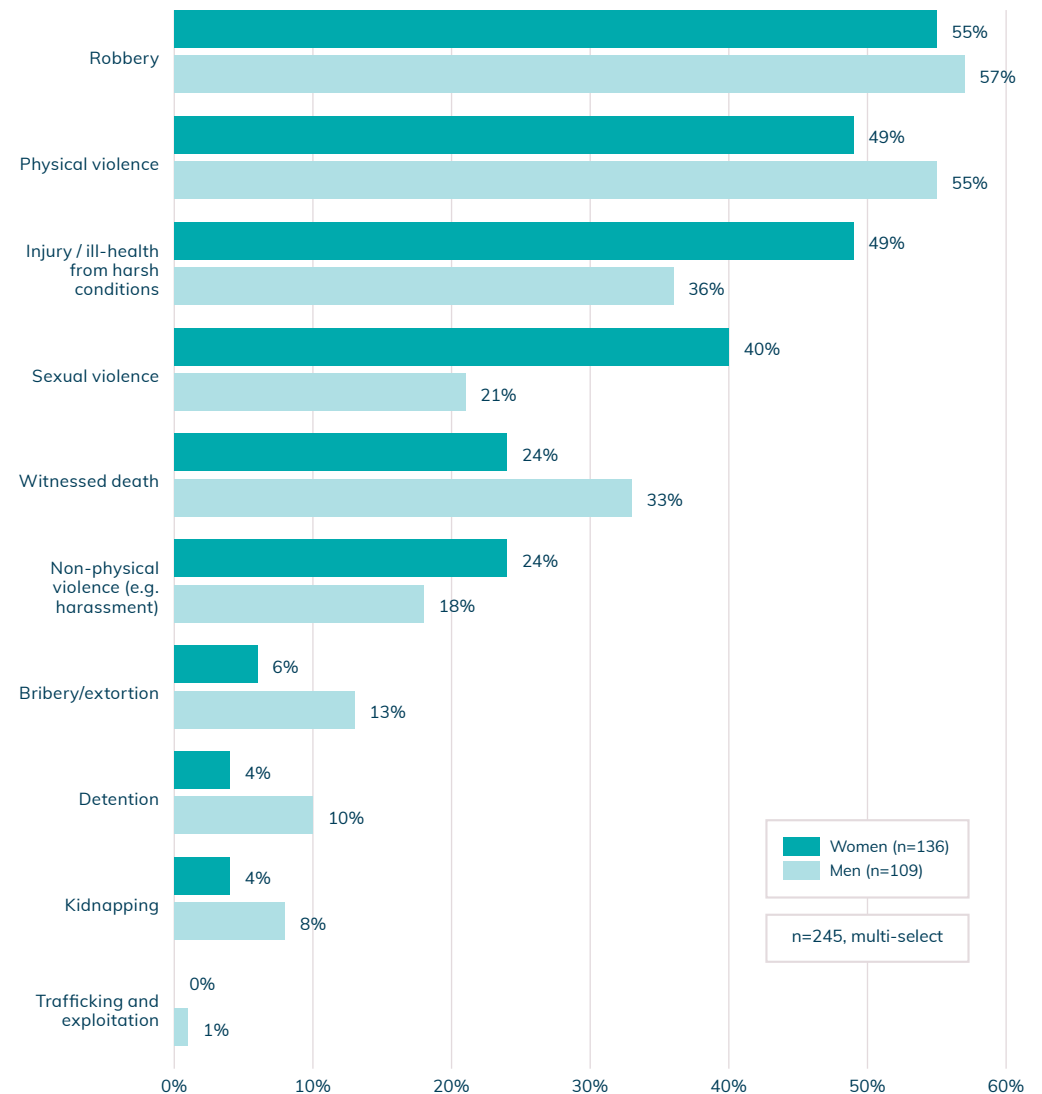
Profile		Ethiopian (n=386)	Eritrean (n=126)	Total (n=512)
Gender	Women	44%	45%	44%
	Men	56%	55%	56%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Location of interview	Djibouti Ville	64%	1%	49%
	Obock	36%	99%	51%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Age group	18-24	32%	6%	25%
	25-34	64%	40%	58%
	35 or older	4%	54%	17%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

Almost half of the respondents have direct experiences of abuse along the journey

Nearly half (48%) of the respondents had personally experienced protection abuses during their journey, with a higher proportion of women (60%) reporting such incidents than men (38%). This gender split was consistent even when disaggregating by nationality. The main risks that respondents had experienced along the journey were robbery (56%), physical violence (52%) and injury/ill-health from harsh conditions (43%).

A higher prevalence of sexual violence and injury or ill-health from harsh conditions appears among women respondents (40% and 49%, respectively). Ethiopian women frequently reported incidents of sexual violence (43%), and Ethiopian men commonly reported witnessing death (44%). Eritrean women, in contrast, frequently reported experiencing non-physical violence (14 out of 27).

Figure 2. Have you personally experienced any of these types of incidents on your journey?

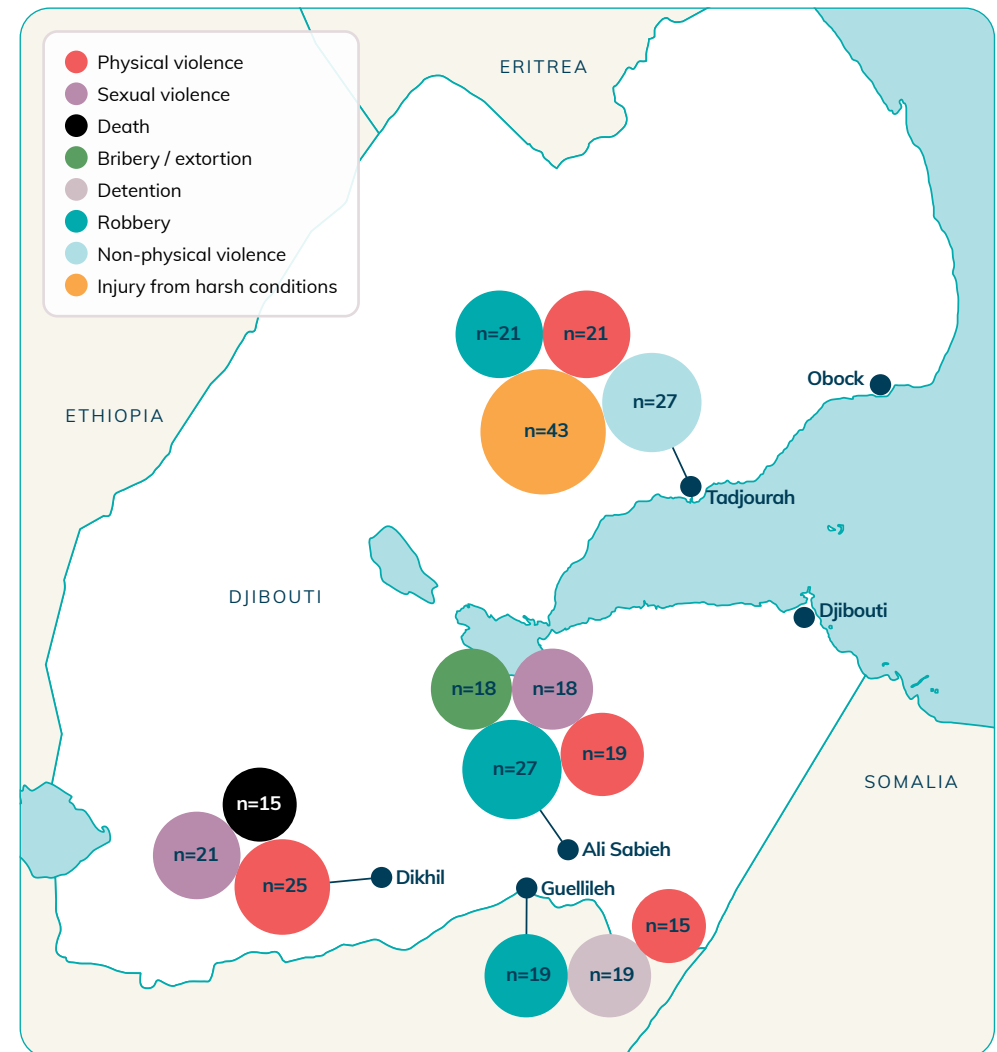


Tadjoura, Guellileh, Ali Sabieh and Dikhil the most dangerous locations for respondents in Djibouti

When identifying dangerous places along their journey from departure in Ethiopia or Eritrea to the interview location in Djibouti, 54% of the respondents said there were dangerous locations in Djibouti. Tadjoura, Guellileh, Ali Sabieh and Dikhil were the most frequently identified dangerous locations. Guellileh, Ali Sabieh and Dikhil are key border crossing points from Ethiopia into Djibouti, whereas Tadjourah is located on the main route used by refugees and migrants transiting between the capital, Djibouti Ville, and Obock, the main point of embarkation for coastal departures to Yemen. Past MMC qualitative research⁴ in Obock suggests that the large and visible smuggling economy in the city, and the sheer number of refugees and migrants, means it is perceived as less of a risky location.

Results on dangerous locations varied considerably by nationality, with 63% of Ethiopians citing a place in Djibouti as compared to 11% of Eritreans. This largely reflects the routes that Ethiopian and Eritrean respondents have taken into Djibouti, where most Eritreans move directly from Eritrea to Obock. In contrast, Ethiopian respondents transited the south of Djibouti, which is where three of the four dangerous locations are found. Both nationality groups perceived the same level of risk in their origin countries (22%).⁵ It is also important to note that while most Eritreans outlined intentions to settle permanently in North America or Europe, most Ethiopians indicated wanting to continue their journeys eastwards to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, a route increasingly notorious for protection abuses and mass killings.⁶

Map 1. Map showing top 4 dangerous locations in Djibouti and the top perceived risks (n=245; multi-select)



Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC and UNHCR.

4 MMC (2022). [Relationships in Transit](#).

5 Among Eritrean respondents who transited Ethiopia (n=32), 14 cited dangerous locations in Ethiopia and 4 cited Djibouti.

6 HRW (2023): ["They Fired on Us Like Rain" Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border](#)

Physical violence, robbery and sexual violence perceived as common risks in Tadjoura, Guellileh, Ali Sabieh and Dikhil

Physical violence, robbery and sexual violence were perceived as prevalent abuses across all four locations (Figure 3). In addition, injury or ill health (43 out of 71) was perceived to be the main risk for people on the move in Tadjourah and detention (19 out of 49) featured in Guellileh. Overall, the data reveals a wide range of abuses occurring in each location.

Figure 3. Protection risks in the top 4 dangerous locations in Djibouti (multi-select)

Location	Tadjoura (n=71)	Guellileh (n=49)	Ali Sabieh (n=45)	Dikhil (n=40)
Physical violence	21	15	19	25
Robbery	21	19	27	13
Sexual violence	10	5	18	21
Injury / ill-health from harsh conditions	43	4	2	5
Non-physical violence (e.g. harassment)	27	1	3	8
Death	6	3	13	15
Bribery/extortion	0	7	18	5
Detention	0	19	5	3
Kidnapping	0	1	2	3

Local communities perceived as the main perpetrators of abuses in Djibouti

In each of the four main dangerous locations, local communities were perceived to be the main perpetrators of abuses (Figure 4). It is interesting to note that local communities rarely feature among the main perpetrators of abuses across global MMC data, where criminal gangs, smugglers, militia and border officials tend to feature more frequently. This finding is notable considering that earlier reports suggest that refugees and migrants are heavily reliant on smugglers when moving through Djibouti; and this might indicate some blurring of definitions by the respondents when referring to local communities and smugglers. Nonetheless in Guellileh, which is one of the main border crossing points between Ethiopia and Djibouti, 17 out of 49 respondents identified border guards and immigration officials as likely culprits of protection incidents.

Figure 4. Who was likely to be perpetrating such incidents? Top 4 dangerous locations in Djibouti (multi-select)

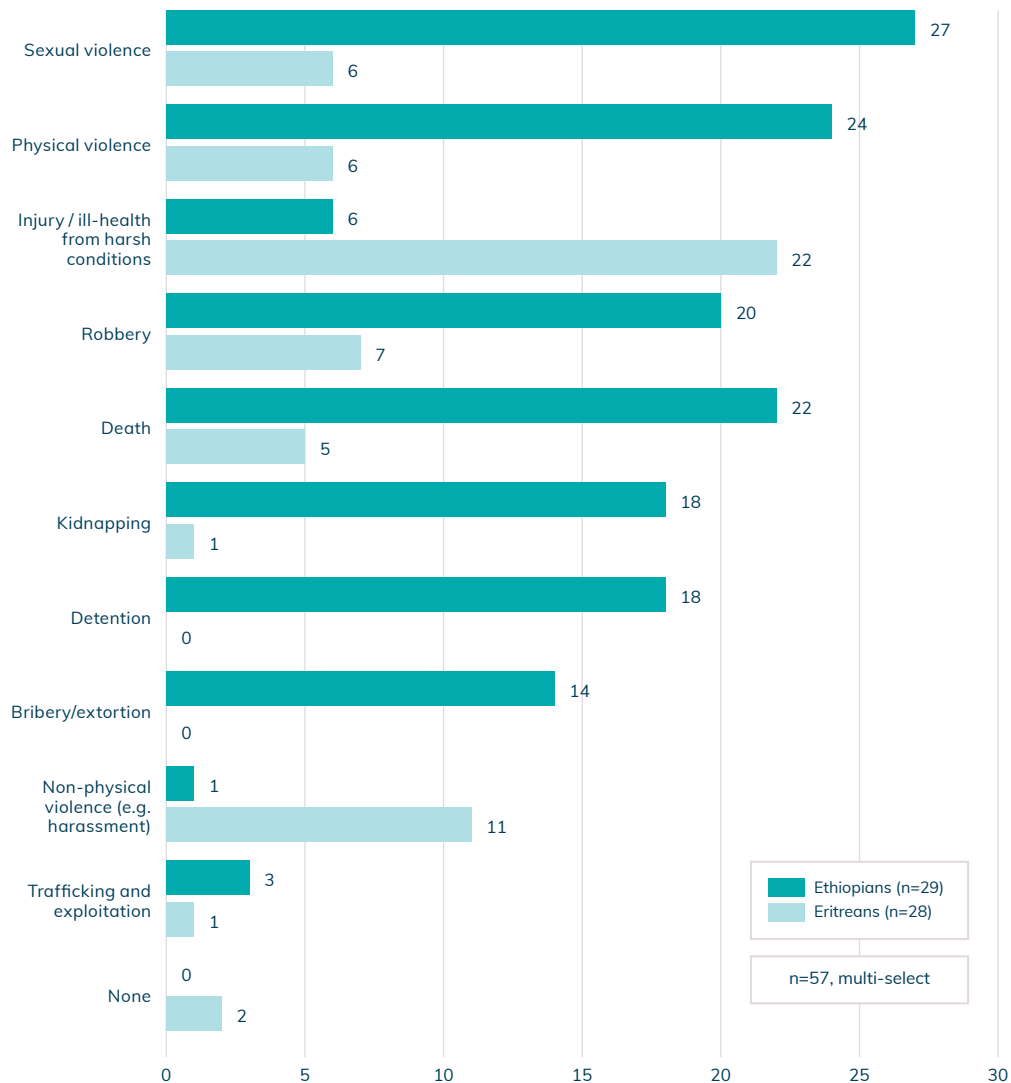
Location	Tadjoura (n=71)	Guellileh (n=49)	Ali Sabieh (n=45)	Dikhil (n=40)
People from local community	56	24	43	38
Criminal gangs	1	7	14	6
Border guards / immigration officials	1	17	0	0
Military / police	6	7	1	4
Smugglers	11	1	1	2
Other refugees and migrants	7	0	1	0

Children on the move in Djibouti are perceived to be at risk of sexual violence, physical violence and injury or ill health from harsh conditions

Respondents traveling or living with children under their care at the time of the interview perceived the primary risks to children to be sexual violence (33 out of 57), physical violence (30) and injury or ill health from harsh conditions (28). Specifically, the majority of

Ethiopians on the move with children (27 out of 29) cited sexual violence as the primary risk followed by physical violence (24) and death (22). The majority of Eritreans perceived the main risk to be injury or ill health due to harsh conditions. As mentioned above, this likely relates to the different routes taken by these two nationalities. Overall, most (49 out of 57) consider children to have been highly to very highly exposed to these dangers, although caution should be taken given the small sample size.

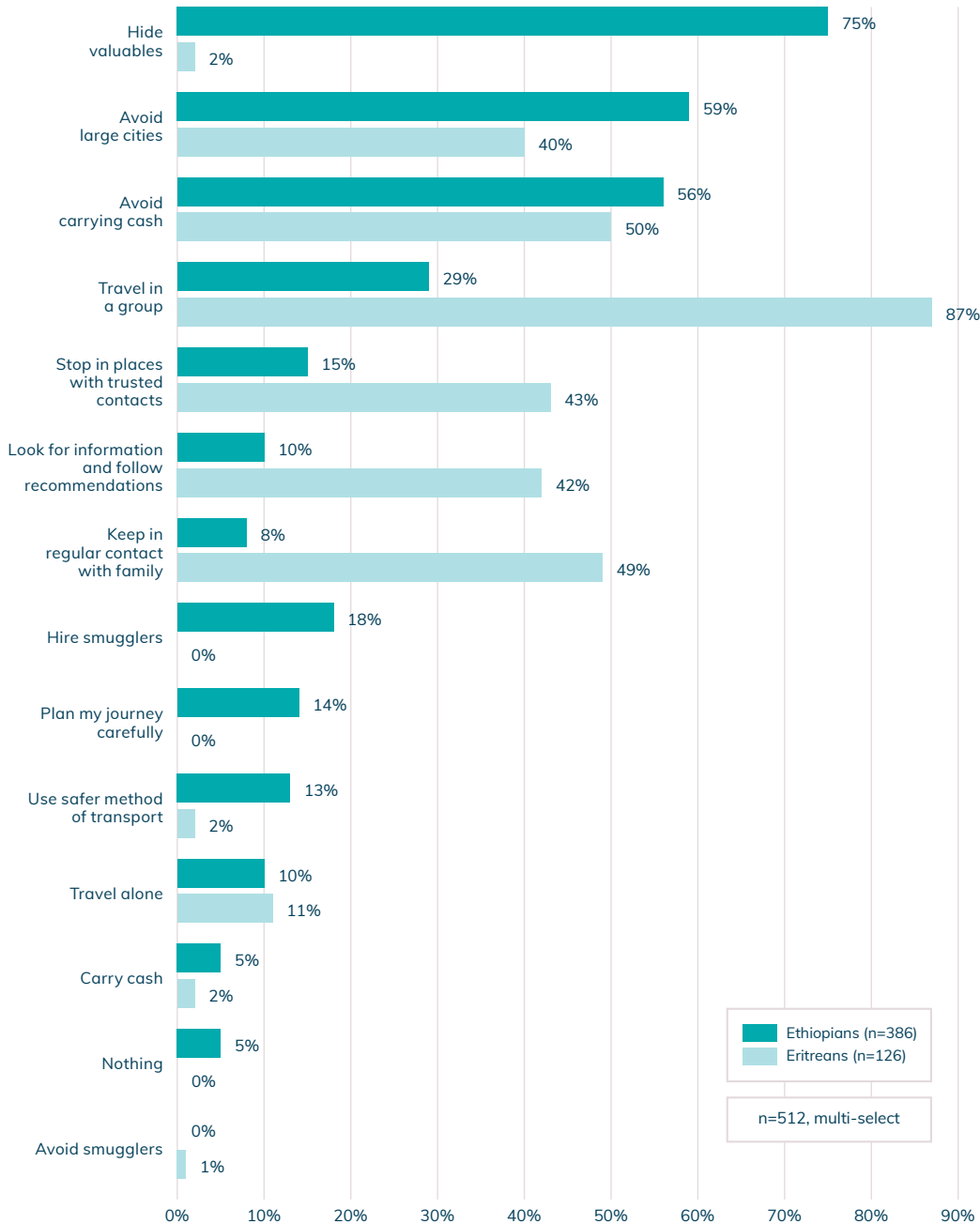
Figure 5. What do you consider to have been the main risks for children under 18?



Eritrean respondents travel in groups and avoid carrying cash to keep safe while Ethiopians hide valuables and avoid large cities

Respondents employ various measures to protect themselves from abuse and crime during their journey. Ethiopian respondents reported hiding valuables (75%), avoiding large cities (59%) and refraining from carrying cash (56%). Eritrean respondents relied on traveling in groups (87%), avoiding carrying cash (50%) and maintaining regular contact with family (49%). Further disaggregation by gender revealed that 30% of Ethiopian women hired smugglers to protect them along the journey as compared to 10% of Ethiopian men. When looking across all the various strategies employed, the data (Figure 6) may suggest that Eritreans plan more in advance and rely on established networks of contacts and family back home than Ethiopians.

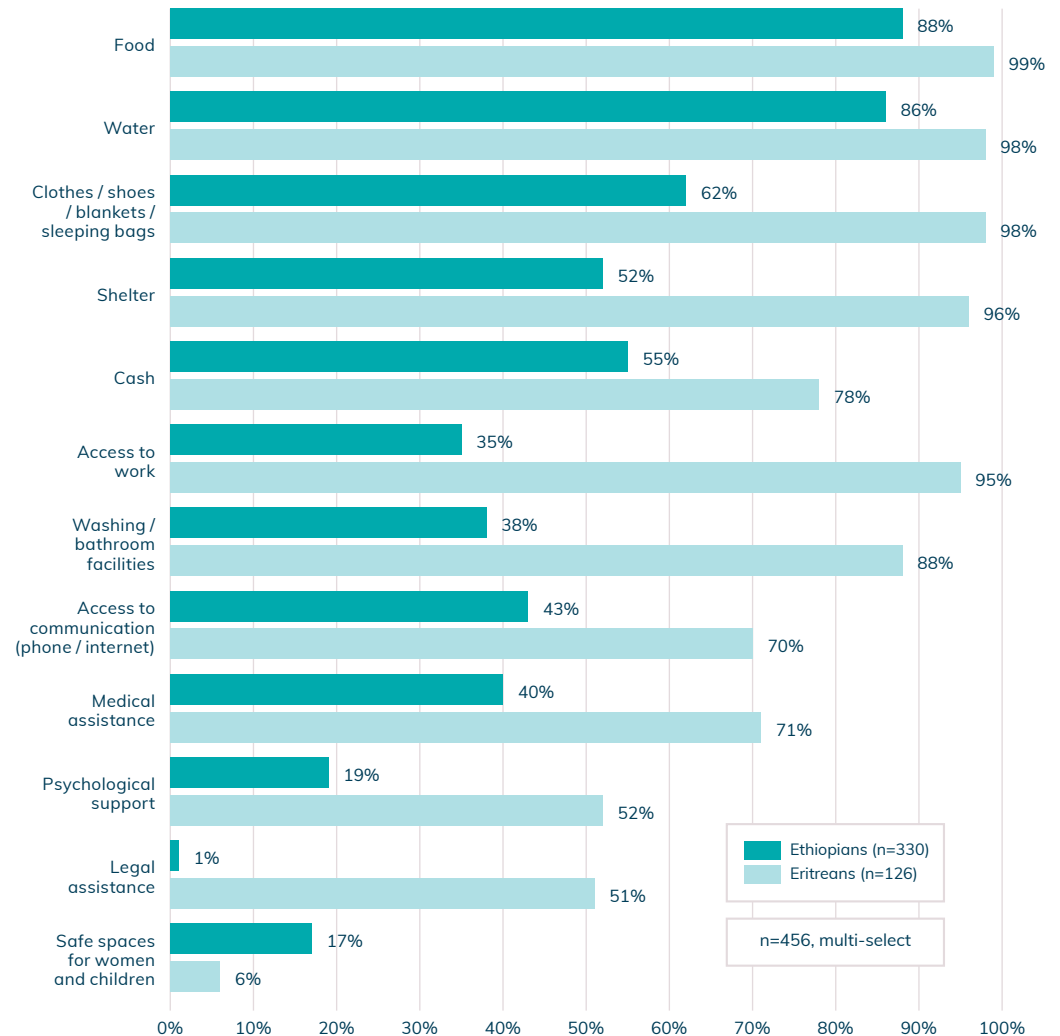
Figure 6. What do you do to protect yourself from abuse and crime on your journey?



Surveyed Ethiopians and Eritreans in Djibouti in need of food, water, clothing and shelter

Nearly all (89%) reported needing assistance at time of interview, the majority (91%) of whom cited food, water (89%), clothing (72%) and shelter (64%) as needs. As presented in Figure 7, Eritrean respondents expressed higher assistance needs across all types of assistance compared to Ethiopian respondents. These findings underscore the harsh conditions of the journey, which often requires that refugees and migrants travel significant distances on foot through Djibouti.

Figure 7. What kind of assistance do you need?



Risks vary by nationality and route

This snapshot has shown that protection experiences in Djibouti and strategies for keeping safe vary considerably by nationality and route through the country (see Figure 6). Zooming out, when comparing the data from Djibouti with parallel data collected in Somalia, the results reveal a far higher rate of experiences of abuse reported by respondents in Somalia (88% compared to 48%).⁷ Similarly, 82% of respondents in Somalia identified locations inside the country as dangerous, in contrast to 54% of respondents in Djibouti. While any conclusions should be treated with caution, as the samples are not representative and therefore not strictly comparable, it may suggest that the route through Djibouti is not as precarious as that through Somalia.

⁷ MMC (2024) [Protection risks, perpetrators and safety measures for Ethiopian refugees and migrants in Puntland](#).



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 refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in East and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

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