

# Security risks in the Darien Gap and assistance needed among migrants

This infographic presents the latest data on the dangers and abuses that migrants interviewed by 4Mi experienced in the Darien Gap, and the assistance needed.

This document is the third in a series of 4Mi's infographics on the Darien Gap, comparing the presented data to figures from 2023 and 2022. It aims to contribute to a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground and advocacy efforts related to the situation of migrants in the region.

## METHODOLOGY

### DATA COLLECTION SITES:

Ciudad Neily and Paso Canoas (southern border); Los Chiles (northern border); Heredia, San Carlos and San José (central Costa Rica).<sup>1</sup>

### DATA COLLECTION PERIOD:

1 January – 31 December 2024

### METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION:

In-person and telephone surveys.

### SAMPLE SIZE:

518 respondents.

## Background

- The Darien Gap continues to be one of the most travelled and, at the same time, most dangerous routes<sup>2</sup> for those seeking to reach Central and North America. The journey through the jungle exposes migrants to extreme weather conditions, diseases, and violence,<sup>3</sup> which, combined with the lack of basic services such as drinking water and food, puts their lives at risk.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2024, 302,203 people entered Panama through the Darien Gap,<sup>5</sup> representing a 42% decrease compared to 2023.<sup>6</sup> This reduction is attributed to the restrictive measures implemented by the government of Panama since July 2024. Measures have included the closure of certain entry points to the jungle,<sup>7</sup> the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the United States<sup>8</sup> to fund deportation flights,<sup>9</sup> and the announcement of fines for migrants who enter irregularly.<sup>10</sup>
- October 2024 marked one year since the implementation of the “humanitarian corridor”, a migration management strategy that transfers people from the Migration Reception Stations (MRS) in Panama to the Southern Migration Station (EMISUR, Spanish acronym for Southern Migration Station) in Costa Rica,<sup>11</sup> where the majority of humanitarian assistance is concentrated. This strategy prioritises the rapid relocation of migrants over ensuring that their immediate needs are met, leaving essential services such as healthcare, psychosocial support, and adequate accommodation as secondary concerns.<sup>12</sup>

## Respondents profiles

### Gender



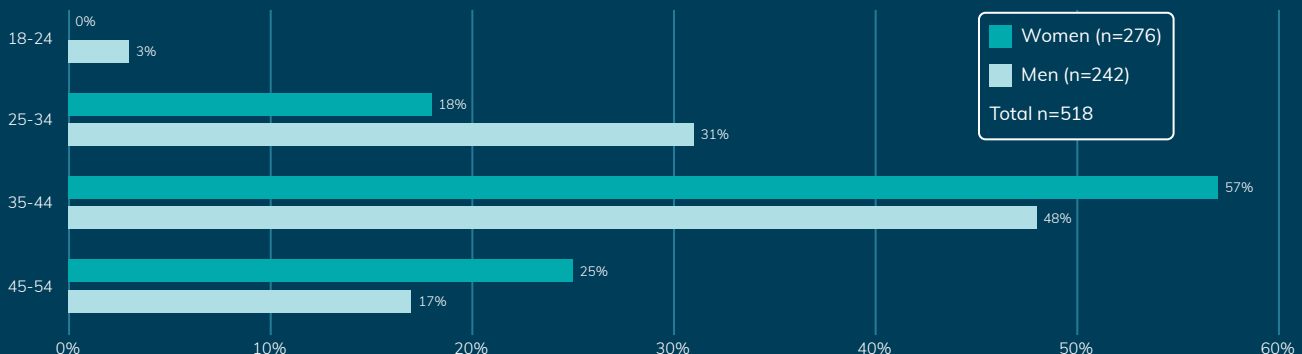
Note: The 4Mi sample is purposive. Therefore, the data presented in this infographic should not be considered representative of mixed migration dynamics through the Darien Gap.

### Profiles

- 53% of respondents were between **25 and 34 years old**.
- **63% of respondents were travelling with at least one child in their care** at the time of the interview (+34 percentage points –pp– compared to 2023, n=324). 65% of respondents travelling with children in their care were women.



### Age



1. Data was collected in Heredia and San Carlos until March 2024. In San José and Los Chiles, data collection began in July 2024.

2. El Colombiano (2024). [La crisis en la selva de El Darién continúa y se estima que en 2025 puede ser peor](#).

3. Human Rights Watch (2024). [Neglected in the Jungle. Inadequate Protection and Assistance for Migrants and Asylum Seekers Crossing the Darién Gap](#).

4. The Conversation (2024). [What is the Darien Gap? and why are more migrants risking this Latin American route to get to the US?](#)

5. National Migration Service of Panama (2024). [Tránsito irregular por el Darién](#).

6. National Migration Service of Panama (2023). [Tránsito irregular por el Darién](#).

7. BBC News (2024). [Las barreras de alambres de púas con las que el gobierno de Panamá](#)

[cerró varios pasos del tapón del Darién](#).

8. Government of Panama (2024). [Memorandum entre el Gobierno de la República de Panamá y el Gobierno de los Estados Unidos de América sobre asistencia y cooperación en asuntos migratorios](#).

9. National Migration Service of Panama (2024). [Panamá y Estados Unidos ponen en ejecución programa de deportación para combatir la migración ilegal](#).

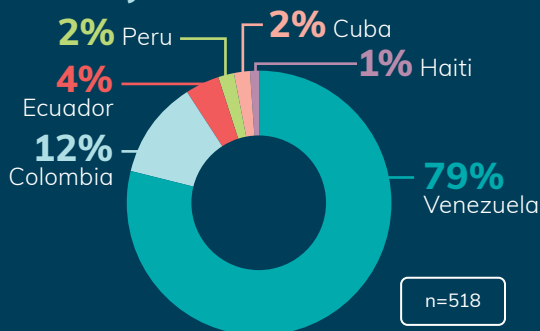
10. El Tiempo (2024). [Panamá anuncia millonaria multa para migrantes que pasen por el Darién: variará según la 'gravedad'](#).

11. IOM (n.d.). [Preparación y respuesta ante crisis migratoria](#).

12. Confidencial (2024). [Después del Darién, el infierno de los migrantes continúa en el "corredor humanitario" de Centroamérica](#).

## Respondents Profiles

### Nationality



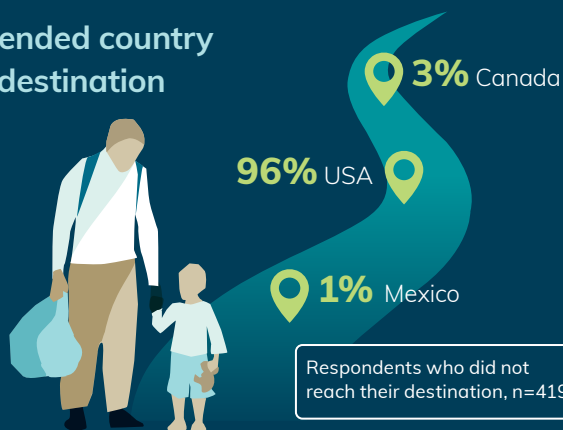
The proportion of nationalities among respondents broadly corresponds to the current composition of registered entries in Panama from the Darien Gap up to December 2024.<sup>13</sup>

### Where Venezuelans' journeys began

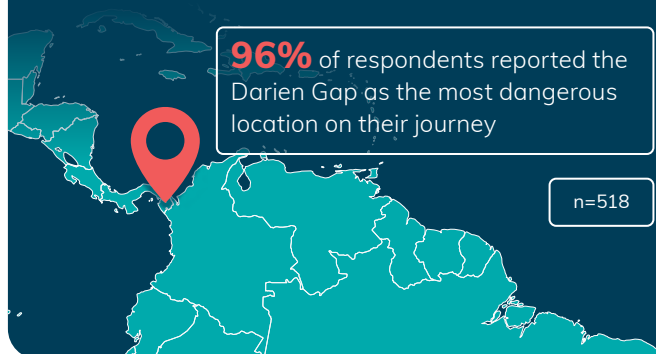


The socioeconomic conditions in Venezuela, limitations on access to services and rights, the electoral results of 28 July and the repressions that followed since,<sup>14</sup> remain key factors prompting Venezuelans to migrate to other countries in the region.

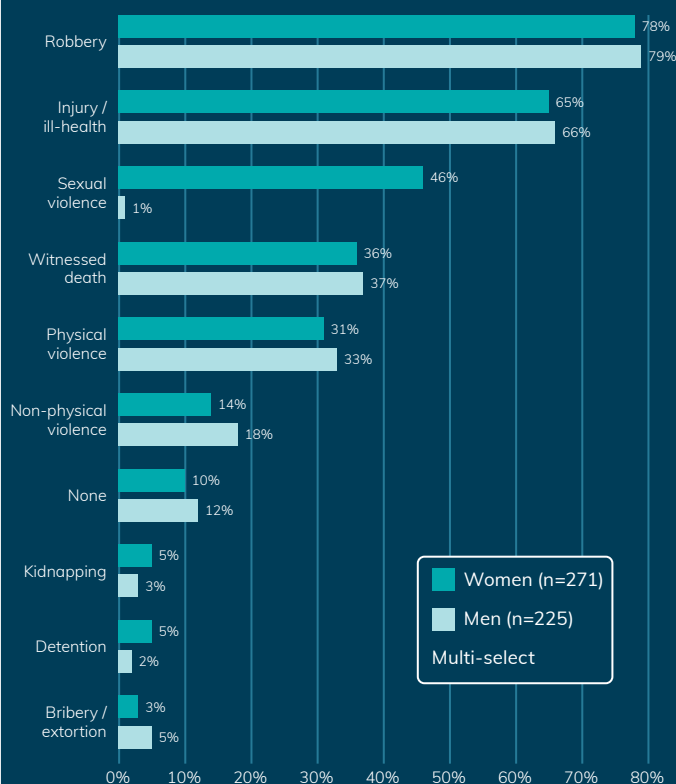
### Intended country of destination



## The most dangerous location reported along the journey



## Abuses and incidents experienced during the journey, by gender



Respondents who reported the Darien Gap as the most dangerous location on their journey, n=496

## Key findings

- Nearly all respondents reported the Darien Gap as the most dangerous place on their journey (96%), marking a 10pp increase compared to 2023. **The measures imposed by the Panamanian government to control migration have forced people to take alternative routes deeper into the jungle to evade official controls**, making the journey even more dangerous.<sup>15</sup>
- 85% of respondents who reported the Darien Gap as the most dangerous location on their journey experienced at least one incident.** Humanitarian actors in the field reported that these incidents generally occur along the Darien Gap, mostly **on the Panamanian side**. The difference between both sides of the border is that the Colombian side is controlled by organised armed groups, who dictate the route and the services offered by smugglers, such as guides for the journey or assistance to migrants carrying luggage or children.<sup>16</sup> On the Panamanian side, there is no demarcation of paths, and the incidents mainly occur at the hands of criminal gangs and local communities.
- While **sexual violence against women** was already at alarming levels in previous years, **this year sees even higher levels** (+17pp compared to 2023 and +31pp compared to the period of July–September 2022). This type of violence is systematic in the Darien Gap, with numerous reports of sexual assaults, many of which are carried out under the pretext of searching for hidden money or belongings.<sup>17</sup>

13. National Migration Service of Panama (2024). Op. Cit.

14. R4V (2024). [BMRP 2025-2026](#).

15. Diario Las Américas (2024). [Anuncios de Panamá convierten a migrantes en "carne de cañón" del crimen organizado](#).

16. The New Humanitarian (2024). [Drowning, sexual violence, or robbery: Pick your route through the Darién](#).

17. Human Rights Watch (2024). [Darién Gap, the jungle where poor migration policies meet](#).

## Main perceived perpetrators of abuses in the Darien Gap



89%

Local Community



47%

Armed groups



24%

Criminal gangs



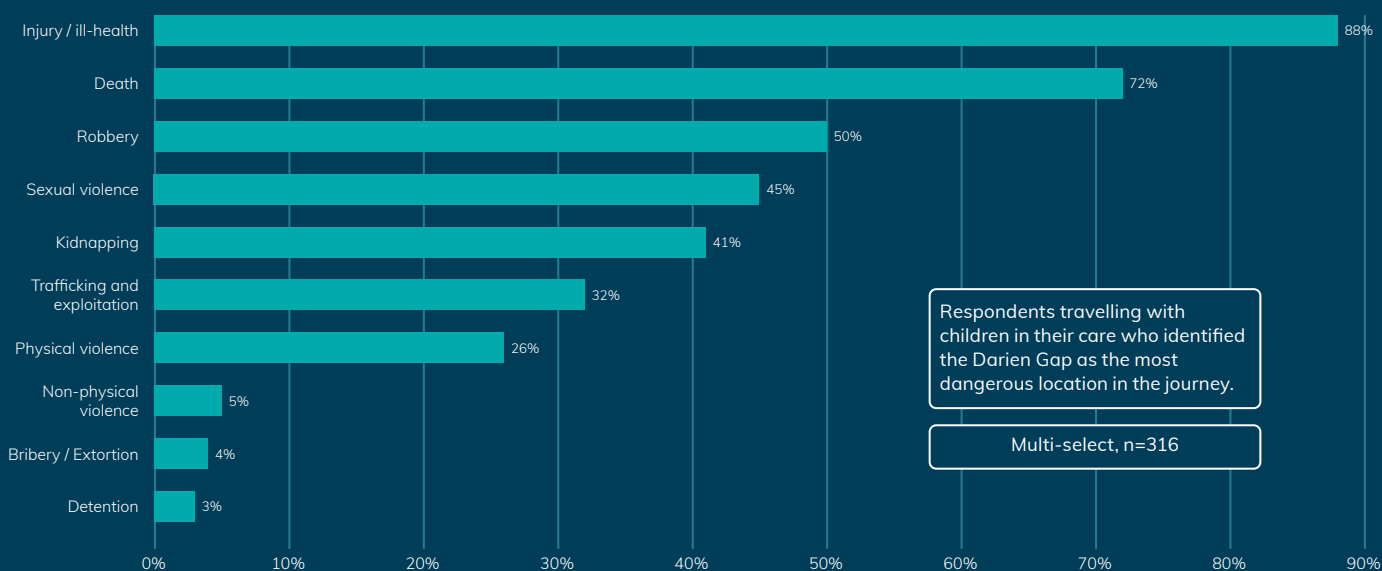
21%

Other migrants

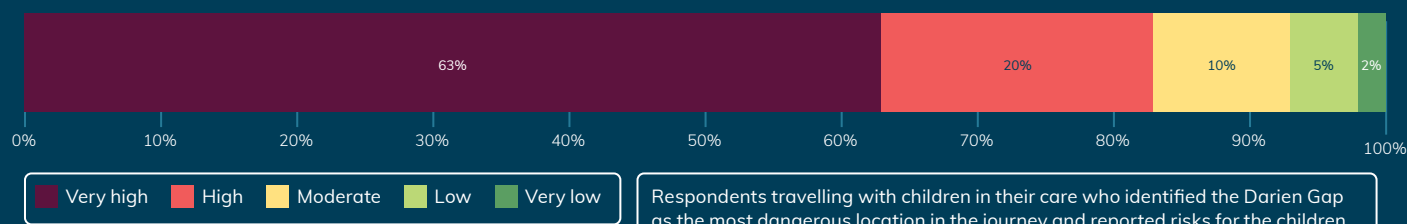
Respondents who reported the Darien Gap as the most dangerous location on their journey, n=496.  
Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

## 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

- Some organisations have raised concerns about the high presence of children on the route,<sup>18</sup> estimating that one in five people crossing the Darien Gap is a minor.<sup>19</sup> **The number of respondents travelling with children in their care increased by 34pp compared to 2023.** The rise in children making the journey highlights the importance of addressing their specific needs and adapting service provision for these children.
- 98% of those travelling with minors in their care reported that children faced risks in the Darien Gap** (+14pp compared to 2023), with **injuries, illnesses and death** being the primary perceived risks. These risks arise due to the conditions of the route and extreme weather.<sup>20</sup> Families travelling with children may take longer to cross the jungle, increasing the risks of **exhaustion, dehydration, and lack of food.**
- 83% of all caregivers mentioned that the children in their care faced a high or very high level of exposure to risks in the Darien Gap.** The exposure is even higher for unaccompanied children, who face risks related to **insecurity and unfamiliarity with the routes.**<sup>21</sup> Providing protection for this group is particularly important given their increasing presence. Compared to 2023, the number of unaccompanied children crossing the Darien Gap has risen by at least 1,200.<sup>22</sup>

18. EFE Comunica (2024). Op. Cit.

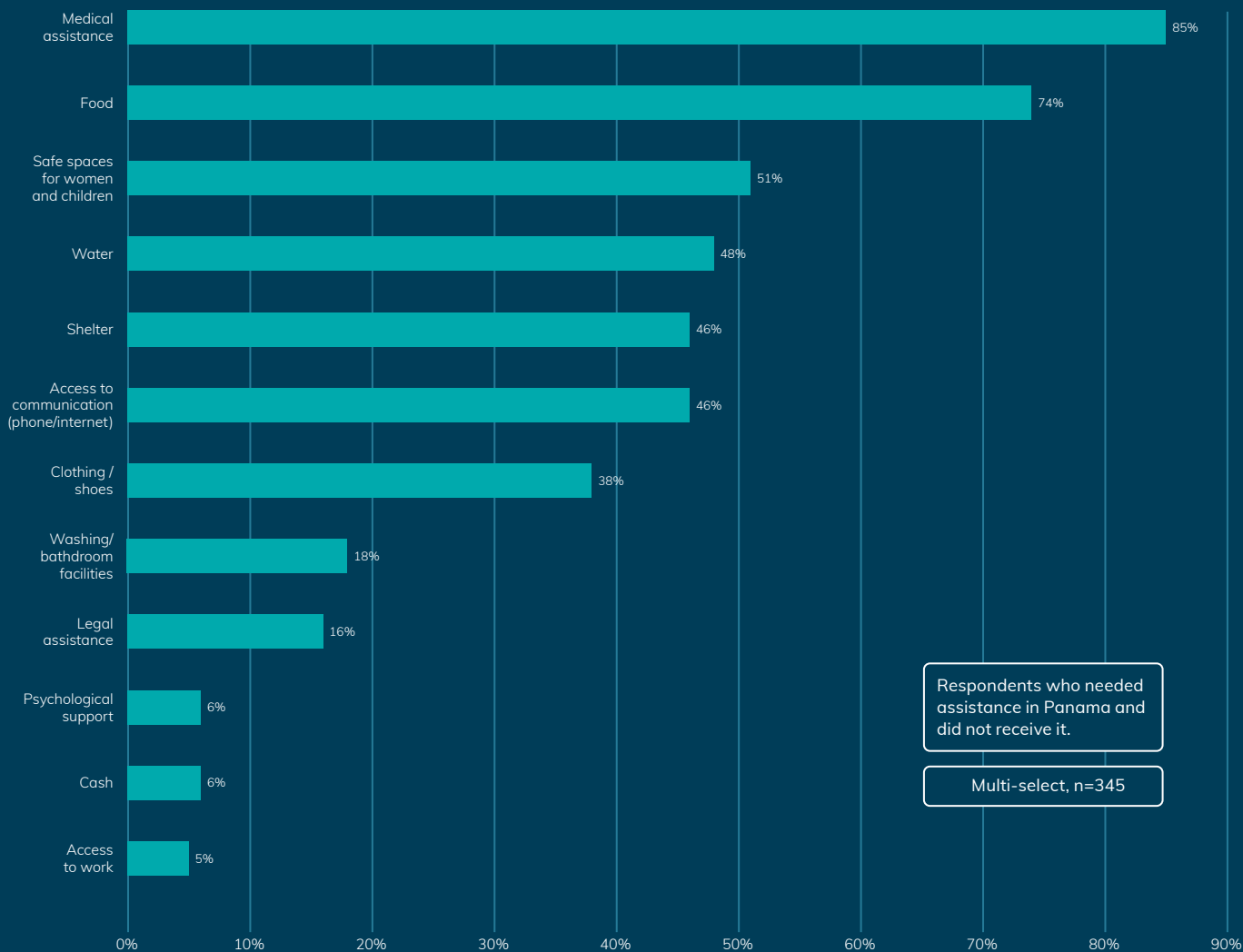
19. UNICEF (2024). [Espacios Seguros para la Infancia y Adolescencia migrante.](#)

20. UNICEF (2024). Op. Cit.

21. Plan International (2024). [Persisten riesgos críticos de protección para niñas y niños migrantes que esperan transitar por el Darién.](#) | MMC (2023). [Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras.](#)

22. UNICEF (2024). [Panama Humanitarian Situation Report # 4, 2024.](#)

# Humanitarian assistance needed by migrants in Panama



## Key findings

- 67% of respondents reported needing assistance in Panama but not receiving it.** After crossing the Darien Gap and walking for several days in extreme conditions, migrants mainly require access to medical services.<sup>23</sup> **The need for medical assistance increased by 16pp in 2024**, which can be linked to the suspension of activities by Médecins Sans Frontières (or Doctors Without Borders), previously the main provider of medical services in the MRS.<sup>24</sup> While Médecins Sans Frontières resumed its activities at the Lajas Blancas MRS in October 2024, its operations are limited to this location. If re-suspended, there is a risk that medical needs will go unmet.
- Respondents' need for access to communication (telephone and internet) in Panama increased by 43pp compared to 2023**, which is linked to the high rate of thefts (mainly cash and mobile phones) in the jungle (75% of respondents). The lack of a phone and internet access increases risks for families travelling separately, as they lose the ability to communicate with each other. Additionally, those who receive money transfers through their phones face difficulties continuing their journey if they lose their phone.
- 51% of respondents with unmet needs in Panama reported needing safe spaces for women and children** (+35pp compared to 2023). Poor conditions in the MRSs, including insufficient lighting and the lack of separation in personal hygiene spaces for men and women, **increase the risk of gender-based violence and sexual violence against women, boys, and girls.**<sup>25</sup> Migrants who survived these types of violence during their journey often do not know how to access services or report incidents,<sup>26</sup> leading to delays in receiving care or leaving the incidents unaddressed.

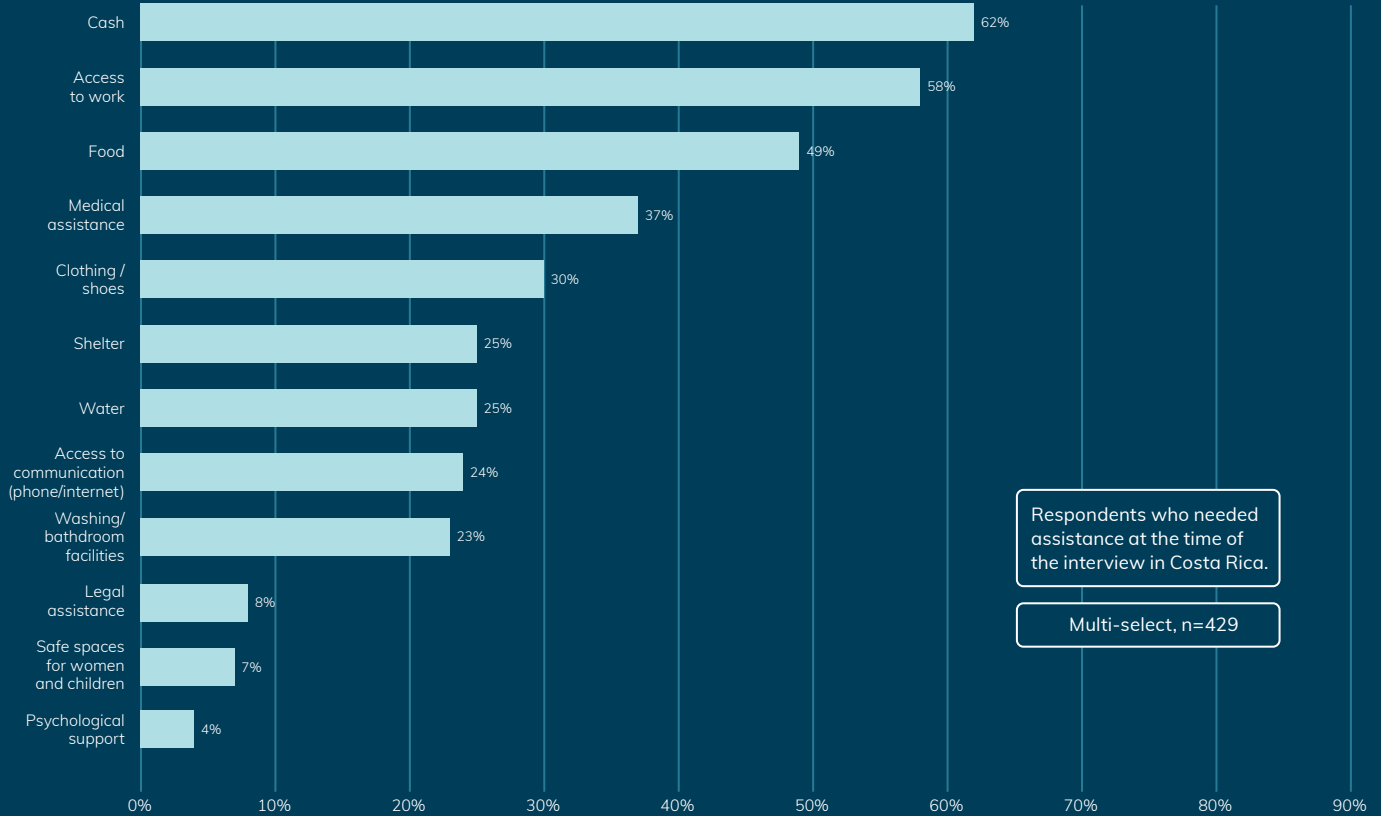
23. Human Rights Watch (2024). Op. Cit.

24. Médecins Sans Frontières (2024). [Médicos Sin Fronteras, obligada a suspender atención médica a migrantes en el Darién Panameño.](#)

25. Human Rights Watch (2024). Op. Cit.

26. Médecins Sans Frontières (2024). [Violencia sexual en El Darién: "Intentaron violarme, me manosearon y me dejaron varios morados".](#)

# Humanitarian assistance needed by migrants in Costa Rica



## Key findings

- 83% of respondents in **Costa Rica** reported needing assistance at the time of the interview (n=429); the need for **cash increased by 10pp compared to 2023**. The rise in the need for funds to continue the journey is linked to the increase in thefts in the jungle and the \$150 fee to obtain a “safe conduct” to enter Nicaragua.<sup>27</sup>
- At EMISUR, non-governmental organisations and UN agencies provide humanitarian assistance.<sup>28</sup> However, most people stay in the space for a very short time (two to three hours), which becomes the main barrier for them to receive assistance. Additionally, **the centralisation of assistance at EMISUR has limited the availability of services in Ciudad Neily, Paso Canoas, and San Jose**, making it more difficult for people outside the “humanitarian corridor” to meet their needs.

27. Confidencial (2024). Op. Cit.

28. Confidencial (2024). Op. Cit.



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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 migration 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](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)

