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**PAPER**

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# Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras

## About this paper

This paper explores the migration experiences of children and caregivers on the move in Honduras. The research project was developed by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), the Centro de Desarrollo Humano (CDH)<sup>1</sup>, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Honduras to gather evidence regarding children on the move throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The study contains an analysis and findings on children's and caregivers' travel conditions and impacts, perceived and experienced security risks during the journey, and humanitarian needs identified by caregivers surveyed in Honduras through the 4Mi project.<sup>2</sup>

## Key terms

For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions apply:

**Children:** refugees and migrants under the age of 18.

**Adolescents:** refugees and migrants between the ages of 10 and 17.

**Unaccompanied children** are those who have been separated from their parents and other relatives, and who are not in the care of an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for their care. This includes children who are travelling in a group unaccompanied by an adult.<sup>3</sup>

**Separated children** are those separated from their parents, their former legal guardian, or the person who is customarily responsible for their care, but not necessarily from other relatives. This category, therefore, includes children accompanied by other adults in their family.<sup>4</sup>

**Caregiver:** an adult refugee or migrant travelling with at least one child under his or her care.

## Key findings

- The migratory journey to North America is a dangerous experience for refugees and migrants with economic vulnerabilities and thus generates prolonged stress and long-term trauma for children. This is due to situations that produce a condition known as “migratory mourning” as well as to the safety risks and abuses faced along the journey.
- The Darien Gap, between Colombia and Panama, is the most dangerous part of the route through the Americas, including for children. In this area, they are at risk of death, injury, and different types of violence, including kidnapping, harassment, sexual violence, and physical violence. In addition, refugees and migrants often have limited access to food and safe water while crossing the Darien. Therefore, children are also at high risk of dehydration and malnutrition.
- Honduras serves as a brief stop on the migration journey, and reports of xenophobic attacks in the country are relatively rare. For this reason, the caregivers surveyed reported a low perception of insecurity while transiting there. However, organisations in the country reported that children could face security risks there.
- Mental healthcare is a critical humanitarian need for children on the move in Latin America and the Caribbean. Although the caregivers did not explicitly state the need for psychological care, they often mentioned the psychosocial effects of the migration process.
- Adolescent boys make up a majority of the separated and unaccompanied children in Latin America and the Caribbean. Such children have additional humanitarian protection needs, given that many carry little or no legal documentation and are considered easy targets by perpetrators of violent acts along the migration route. The migration movements of separated and unaccompanied children are under-registered in the region.

1 CDH is an organisation dedicated to the promotion of human rights and the advancement of alternative human development.

2 For more 4Mi data on children, caregivers, and youth on the move in Honduras, see the MMC dashboard: [Children, youth, and caregivers are on the move in Honduras](#).

3 International Committee of the Red Cross (2004) [General inter-agency guidelines on unaccompanied and separated children](#).

4 [Ibid.](#)

## Introduction

One in five of the 391,004 refugees and migrants known to have entered Honduran territory irregularly between 1 January and 15 October 2023 were under the age of 21. These arrivals were over three times more numerous than those recorded during the same period in 2022.<sup>5</sup> Most crossed Honduras' southern border with the intention of travelling on to the United States or (in the case of a small minority) to Canada.<sup>6</sup>

Although the profiles of those who entered Honduras during this period in 2023 were diverse and included some refugees and migrants from Asia and Africa, most (86%) of the people on the move registered in the country came from the Latin America and Caribbean region. Venezuelans represented 44% of all registered entries, while those arriving from Cuba, Ecuador, Haiti, and Colombia accounted for 40%.<sup>7</sup>

Children on the move all over the world face many severe risks and needs requiring targeted responses, but they are often overlooked when essential data is collected.<sup>8</sup> According to UNICEF, "persistent gaps in timely, accurate and disaggregated data for migrant and displaced

children" make it challenging to support evidence-based policymaking in the region.<sup>9</sup>

In an effort to bridge at least part of this information gap, this paper presents an overview of children's migration experiences, impacts, and security risks as they transit through the Americas and Honduras, as perceived by their caregivers.

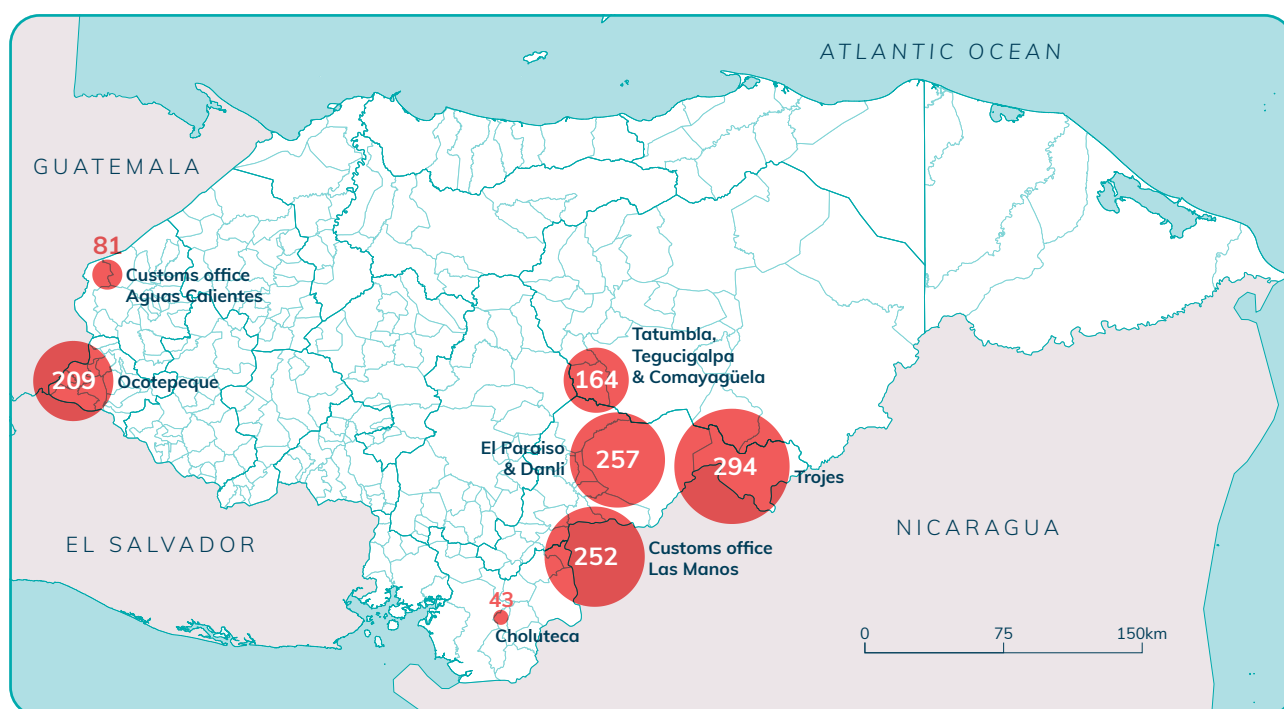
## Methodology

The analysis in this study is based on quantitative and qualitative 4Mi data collected by MMC and CDH, with support from UNICEF Honduras.

**Quantitative information** was collected through face-to-face 4Mi surveys conducted with 1,300 adults who migrated with children in their care.

The surveys were conducted between 15 May and 17 September 2023 at locations along the main migration routes in Honduras: Trojes (294); El Paraíso & Danlí (257); Customs office Las Manos (252); Ocotepeque (209); Tatumbula, Tegucigalpa, and Comayagüela (164); Customs office Aguas Calientes (81); and Choluteca (43).

**Map 1. Locations of 4Mi surveys conducted in Honduras**



5 Instituto Nacional de Migración (n.d.) [Migración Irregular](#). Accessed 18 October 2023.

6 Almost all (99.9%) entered via the municipalities of Danlí, Trojes and Choluteca. Instituto Nacional de Migración (n.d.) [Migración Irregular](#). Among the people surveyed by 4Mi, 96% were heading to the United States of America and 2% to Canada.

7 Instituto Nacional de Migración (n.d.) [Migración Irregular](#). Accessed 18 October 2023. The remaining 2% corresponded to people from Brazil, Chile, Peru, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Guyana, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, El Salvador, Guatemala, French Guyana, and Puerto Rico.

8 International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (2023) [Data gaps and solutions. How to protect children on the move from current and emerging global challenges](#).

9 UNICEF (2023a) [From Promises to Action: Towards Better Data for Migrant and Displaced Children](#).

**Profiles:** Among the caregiver respondents, 24% were youth between 18 and 25 years old, 55% were between 26 and 35 years old, 18% were between 36 and 45 years old, and 3% were over 46 years old.

Almost all (99%) respondents were Latin American or Caribbean nationals (75% were from Venezuela, 8% from Ecuador, 7% from Cuba, 6% from Colombia, and 3% from other countries in the region), and 1% were from African countries.<sup>10</sup>

The majority (65%) of respondents were women, reflecting that caregiving tasks on the migration route were primarily delegated to women, even when they migrated together with adult men.

A total of 2,338 children were travelling with the caregivers surveyed. On average, each caregiver migrated with two children.

**Qualitative information** was collected through the following:

- Five semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with refugees and migrants (see table below).<sup>11</sup>
- Three in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants working with three organisations which help refugees and migrants in Honduras: the Fundación Alivio del Sufrimiento in El Paraiso, the Honduran Red Cross in Tegucigalpa, and a governmental institution working with children in Trojes.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 1. Interviewee profiles**

Profile	Gender	Age	Nationality	Location
Caregiver with a 1-year-old child	Female	25	Venezuelan	Tatumbla
Caregiver with two children, 2 and 9 years old	Female	31	Colombian	Tatumbla
Caregiver with a 2-year-old child	Male	22	Venezuelan	Trojes
Caregiver with a 3-year-old child	Male	29	Venezuelan	Comayagüela
Caregiver with 8- and 15-year-old children	Male	36	Ecuadorian	Las Manos

The MMC/CDH team in the field also conducted weekly non-participant observation exercises to identify the migratory dynamics of unaccompanied and separated children in the survey areas.

## Limitations

This study has two primary limitations:

- 4Mi sampling employs non-probability, purposive sampling. Therefore, the data presented is not necessarily representative of overall mixed migration dynamics in Honduras.
- MMC did not collect information directly from children, so their migratory experiences are approximated from the perspective of their caregivers and the key informants. Information about unaccompanied and separated children was consolidated from

non-participatory observation exercises, interviews with field actors, and secondary sources consultation.

## Core observations

### Women are the principal caregivers of children along the migration route

Almost two thirds (65%) of the 1,300 caregivers surveyed by 4Mi for this study were women. By contrast, more than twice as many men as women entered Honduras irregularly between January and mid-October 2023.<sup>13</sup>

When 4Mi teams approached the refugee and migrant groups on the route, women typically assumed the responsibility of answering the survey questionnaire. In the interviews and surveys, most women recognised themselves as having primary responsibility for the children's care, which included tasks related to food, shelter, and health. According to key informant interviews

10 Although the Haitian population represented 14% of the people on the move registered in Honduras, less than 1% of those surveyed were of this nationality due to language barriers to contact.

11 The interview profiles were purposefully selected based on the predominant transit patterns observed, focusing on the young Latin American population migrating with one or two children.

12 This institution requested not to be identified by name.

13 214,336 men vs 99,390 women. Instituto Nacional de Migración (n.d.) [Migración Irregular](#). Accessed 18 October 2023.

and secondary sources, migration processes in Latin America reflect that activities derived from the “domestic sphere” are societally considered the direct responsibility of women.<sup>14</sup> Thus, even during transit, women are typically responsible for the physical and emotional care of families, children and/or travel groups.<sup>15</sup>

A significant proportion (45%) of respondents said they had sole responsibility for the children in their care on the journey. This was more frequently the case for women (51%) than for men (35%), a difference that may be due to the fact that many women on the route travel without partners but with children, either because they are single mothers or because they are travelling to join partners who have migrated ahead of them.

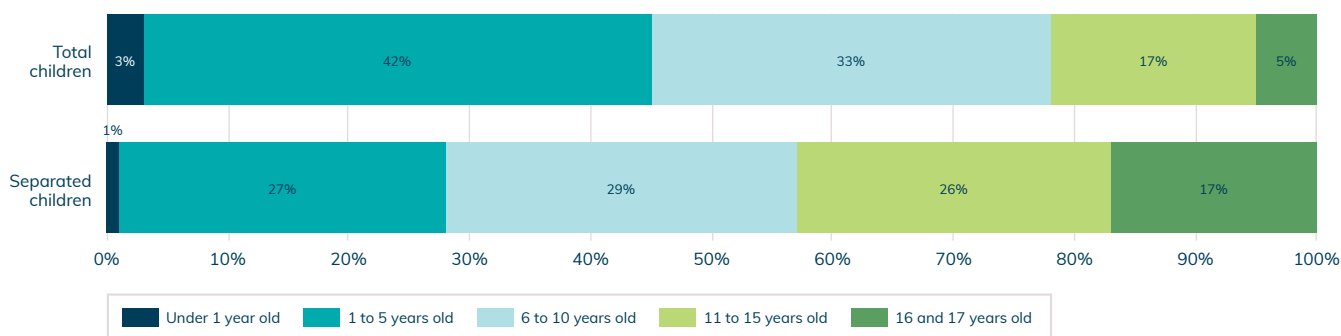
Not having support from other adults to care for children correlates with greater vulnerability to safety risks along the route: 75% of the female respondents who shared responsibility for the care of the children they were

travelling with said they had faced or witnessed violent incidents during their journey, a proportion that rose to 88% in the case of women who were solely responsible for the children.

### Profiles and vulnerabilities of separated and unaccompanied children

Most (98% of female and 87% of male) surveyed caregivers reported that they were travelling with their own child or children.<sup>16</sup> But at least 115 survey respondents (50 women and 65 men) were caring for separated children. Of these, 33% reported travelling with nieces and nephews, 18% with stepchildren, 14% with grandchildren and 13% with siblings. Additionally, 11% were travelling with unrelated children, such as friends, members of the same community and children they met on the trip. Relative to all the children registered in the survey, the separated children travelling with these caregivers were older on average (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Age distribution of all children vs separated children travelling with survey respondents**



The number of boys aged between 0 and 10 entering Honduras between 1 January and 15 October 2023 was similar to the number of girls in the same age group (see Figure 2).<sup>17</sup> However, for every female in the 11-20 age group, there were 1.5 males.

According to the interviewed people, a significant number of teenagers and young men undertake the migration route unaccompanied by older members of their families, which may partially explain this difference. A lower perception of insecurity during the migratory journey and the likelihood of being considered economic providers may explain why they often travel alone.<sup>18</sup>

14 International Organization for Migration (2023) [Gender, migration, and care work](#). (Page 9).

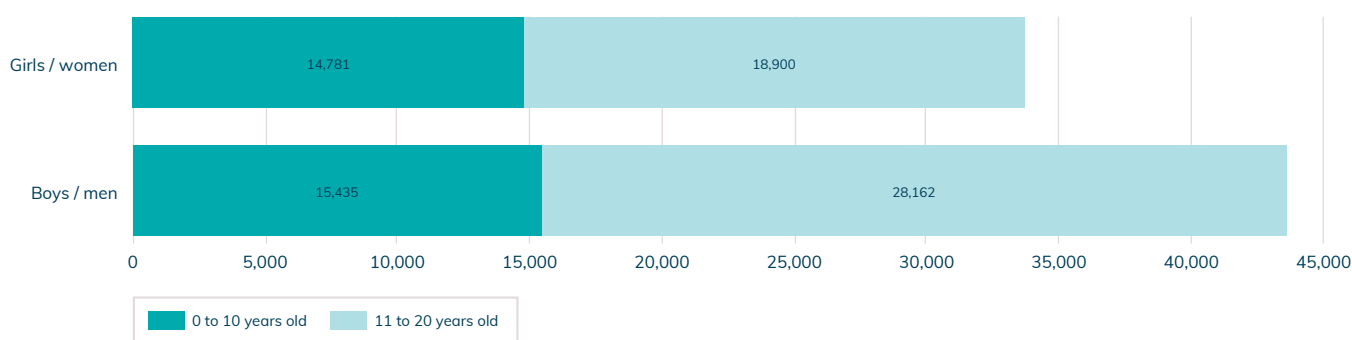
15 Álvarez Velasco, S. & Varela-Huerta, A. (2022) [En el camino, si nosotras no cuidamos, ¿quién entonces?](#), Tramas y Redes Magazine.

16 11% of male respondents were migrating with children from their extended families—mainly nephews, stepchildren, siblings, and grandchildren. The remaining 2% were migrating with children unrelated to them, such as acquaintances from the community or children encountered during the migration journey.

17 Instituto Nacional de Migración (n.d.) [Migración Irregular](#). Accessed 18 October 2023.

18 Of the 310 respondents aged between 18 and 25, the 74 men—as a group—had a slightly higher perception of safety than the 236 women, with 12 of the men (16%) saying they had not experienced any incidents on the migratory route, compared to 16 (7%) of the women. In addition, the 47 young men who had generated an income in the year prior their migratory journey had—again, as a group—slightly more financial responsibility in their households than the 99 young women: 38 (81%) of these men were fully responsible compared to 41 (41%) of the women.

**Figure 2. Registered arrivals to Honduras of children and youth, by age group and sex, 1 January–15 October 2023**



Source: [Instituto Nacional de Migración](#).

While it is likely that the number of unaccompanied children migrating through Honduras is growing in line with the overall number of children on the route, there are no official disaggregated statistics about unaccompanied children. This data gap prompted the MMC/CDH research team to conduct weekly qualitative data collection on the migration dynamics of unaccompanied and separated children in Honduras.

According to this study's key informants, the most common profile of unaccompanied children are male adolescents between 15 and 17 years of age from various countries in Asia, Africa, and South America. The governmental institution that contributed to this study reported that unaccompanied minors from African and Asian countries—particularly Egypt and Uzbekistan—typically travel with proper documents, including apostilled authorisations from their parents. By contrast, those from South American countries usually travel without valid documents. This makes transit between countries more difficult and exposes the children to greater risks, especially if they try to avoid immigration controls along the route.

Moreover, the key informants said the humanitarian needs of unaccompanied and separated children in Honduras varied according to their nationality. While migrants from outside the continent tend to have better economic conditions and access to essential services, those from Latin America (e.g., Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador) tend to have greater economic needs, less suitable clothing, and less access to food and basic services, such as toilets and showers, drinking water, and cell phone charging points.

Nevertheless, the informants reported that all unaccompanied and separated children have humanitarian needs such as shelter, health, clothing, food, water, sanitation, and hygiene. These needs are

similar to those of the general migrant population. However, the key informants noted that these children have different information and protection needs, as they tend to have less access to legal guidance and are considered easy targets for perpetrators of violent attacks (e.g., kidnapping, bribery, detention, sexual violence, and forced recruitment).

### Some Venezuelan children engage in secondary migration

*“The child always asks if we are going home, nothing else.”*

**29-year-old Venezuelan man**

Of the 975 Venezuelan caregivers surveyed in Honduras, 278 (29%) had previously attempted to settle in another country in the region before deciding to move on. Of this group, most were living in Colombia (57%), Peru (21%) and Ecuador (13%) before embarking on this migratory journey. Almost all (94%) of the 278 attributed their decision to remigrate (at least in part) to economic factors in their previous host country. Other explanations included violence, insecurity, and conflict (39%), as well as corruption and difficulty in accessing services such as education and health care (31%), with no significant variation in these percentages recorded between country of departure.<sup>19</sup>

Of the 1,428 children with one or more Venezuelan parents who were under the care of survey respondents, 236 (17%) were engaged in secondary movement, having begun their current journey in a country other than that of their nationality.<sup>20</sup> As discussed later in this paper, such multiple migratory movements contribute to “migratory mourning”, and make it extremely difficult for children to settle and forge ties in safe spaces.

19 For more 4Mi data regarding why Venezuelan refugees and migrants leave host countries in the region, see the Mixed Migration Centre dashboard: [Returning to Venezuela](#).

20 Despite their parentage, not all these children are Venezuelan citizens.

### Children whose caregivers have lower purchasing power appear to be at greater risk

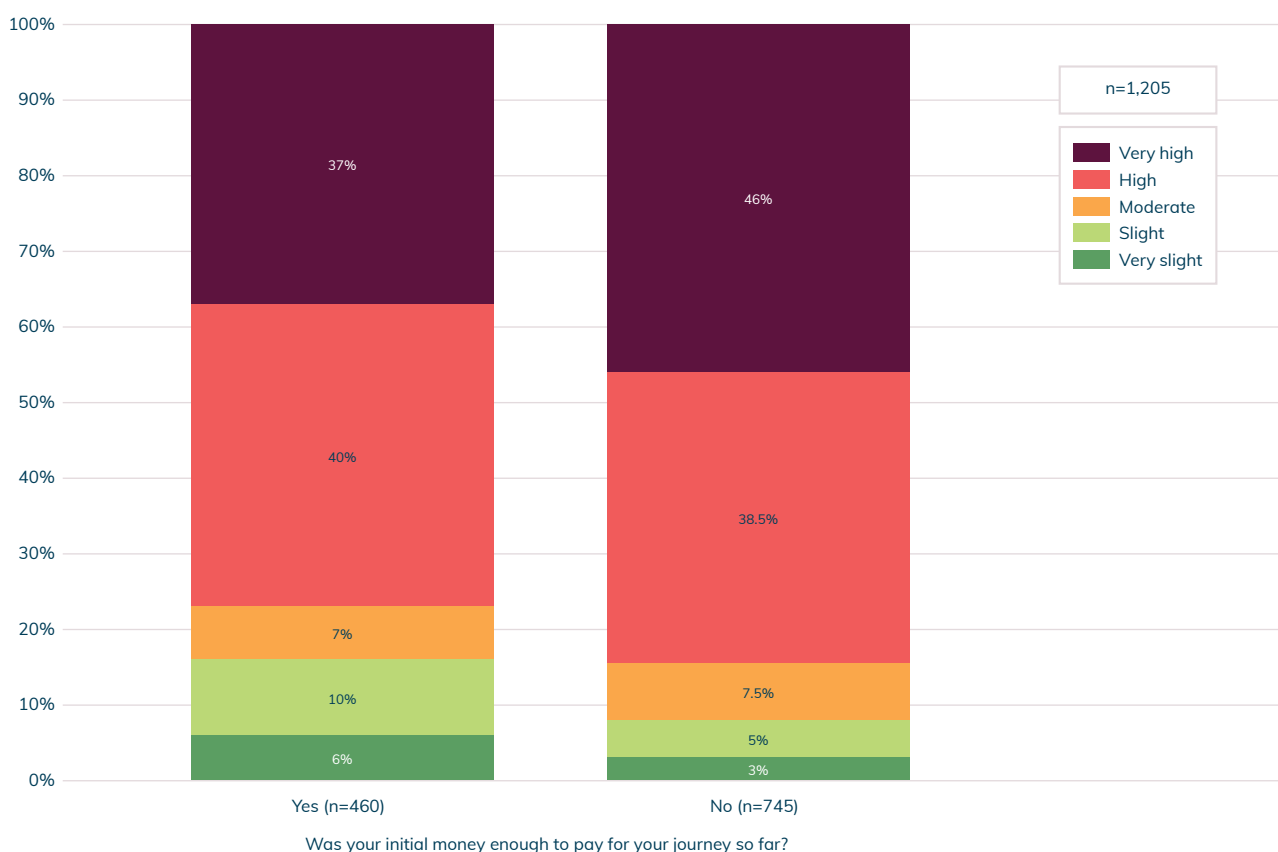
Almost half (47%) of the caregivers surveyed stated that they had earned no money in the 12 months before migrating, and 59% noted that the money they had saved for the trip had not been sufficient to meet their needs up to the time of the survey.<sup>21</sup> Those with fewer financial resources appear to be exposed to higher risks when on the move: of the 745 caregivers with insufficient funds, 341 (46%) identified very high levels of risk to the children in their care during their migratory journey, compared to 172 of the 460 (37%) who said they had sufficient funds.

These findings echo recent UNICEF analysis indicating that refugee and migrant children using irregular

pathways in the Latin America and the Caribbean region typically lack the resources needed for safe and efficient transport and are thus choose longer and more hostile migratory routes, use precarious means of transportation, and/or walk for long distances. Generally, their journeys involve significant security risks, including violence, diseases, and/or injuries and traumas due to road conditions.<sup>22</sup>

Research conducted for this and previous MMC studies indicates that people with greater financial means are generally able to migrate in a less insecure way by, for example, hiring safer transport services, using motorised transport for long journeys, or even flying to Central America to avoid crossing the Darien Gap.

**Figure 3. Children's exposure to risk and caregivers' financial resources**  
4mi survey responses - What level of risk have the children in your care been exposed to?



### Children are at constant risk on the migration route

Ninety-four percent of the caregivers surveyed stated that the children in their care faced some kind of incident or abuse along the migration route. The majority identified injury or illness from harsh conditions as the main risk (reported by 77% of caregivers who identified

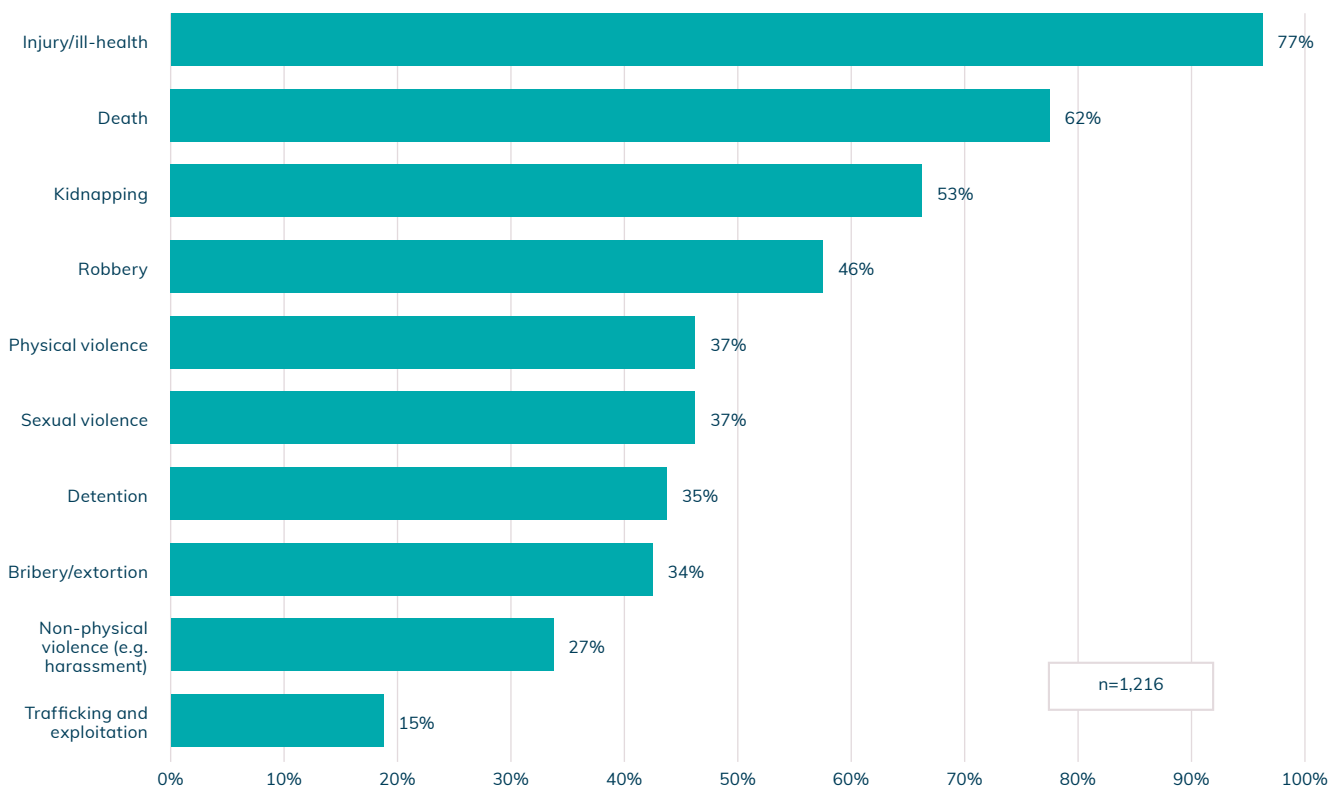
at least one risk), followed by death (62%), kidnapping (53%), and robbery (46%).

Furthermore, between 30% and 40% of respondents perceived the children in their care as having been at risk of sexual violence, physical violence, detention, or extortion at some point during the journey (see Figure 4).

21 According to 687 respondents, the average cost of the migration journey was USD 1,400 until Honduras.

22 UNICEF (2023b) [Childhood at risk: The changing face of migrant children in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region like no other](#).

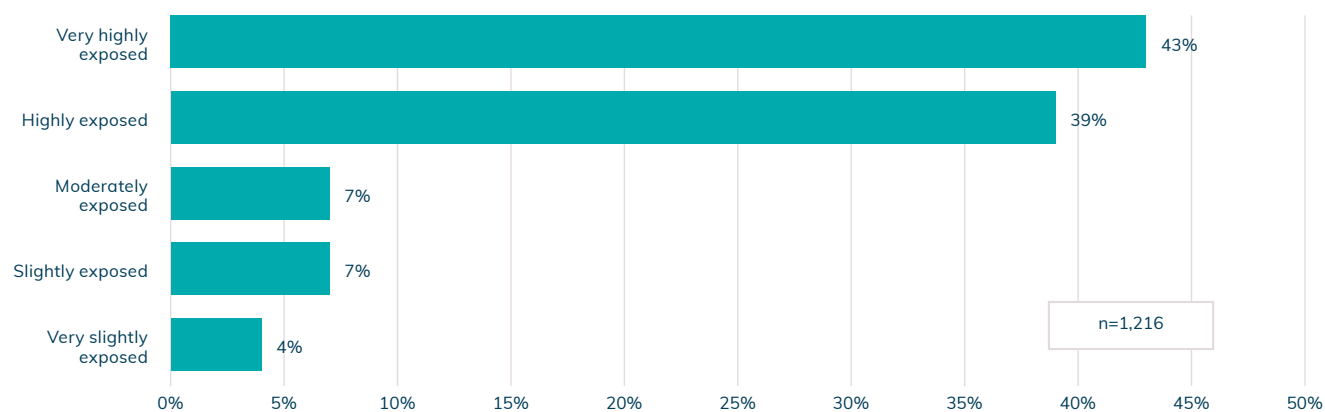
**Figure 4. Types of risks children faced along the migration route to Honduras**  
4Mi survey responses from caregivers who identified at least one risk for children



Eighty-two percent of those who identified at least one risk to children during their migratory journey considered

the level of exposure to these risks to be high or very high (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Children's exposure to risk of incidents or abuses along the migratory route**  
4Mi survey responses from caregivers who identified at least one risk for children





*“I never separate from him; I always bring him here, between my arms, and I have a suspicious mind. I don’t trust anyone, and I don’t let anyone get close to him.”*

**25-year-old Venezuelan woman, migrating with a one-year-old child**

The primary protection mechanism used on the migratory route was to travel in a group; this was reported by 83% of the surveyed caregivers. Similarly, the most frequently mentioned measure used by the caregivers to physically protect the children they travelled with was to avoid separating from them under any circumstances. This indicates that unaccompanied children are seen to be at particular risk of harm along the route.

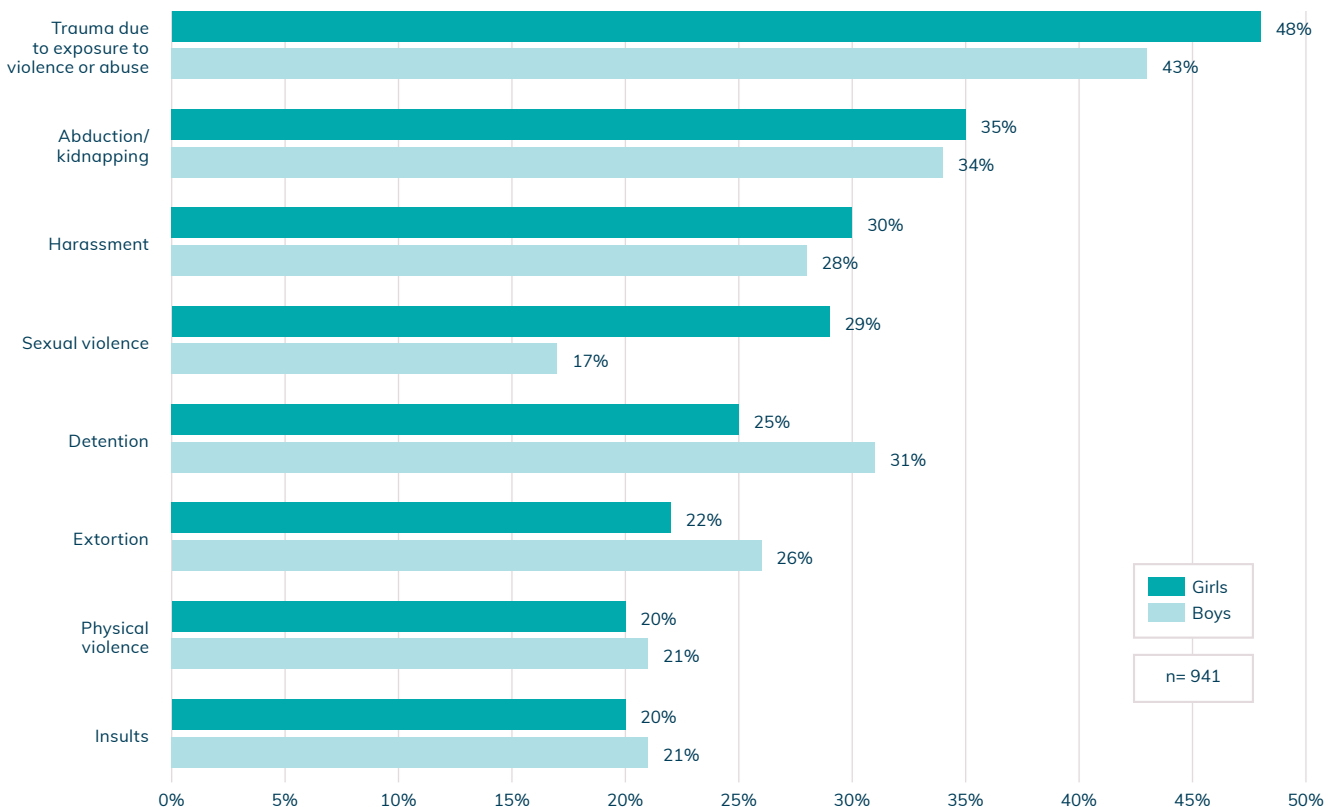
Most (87%) of the 1,216 caregivers who said that children faced safety risks on the journey reported the Darien Gap—a vast area of swamps and rainforest devoid of infrastructure that straddles the border between Colombia and Panama (explored in further detail below)—was the most dangerous location for children, while 6% identified locations in Nicaragua—such as Pajaro Negro and Managua—as particularly dangerous.

Of the 52 respondents who began their route in Central America and the Caribbean and who did not pass through the Darien Gap, 21 (40%) did not identify any part of the journey as dangerous for children.

**The Darien Gap: the most dangerous point on the migration route**

More than half (52%) of the 941 caregivers who identified the Darien Gap as the most dangerous point on the migratory route for children perceived trauma as the main risk for children there, while others cited kidnapping (41%), and harassment (35%, see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Risks faced by children in the Darien Gap**  
4Mi survey responses from caregivers who identified the Darien Gap as the most dangerous location for children on the migratory route



According to the qualitative findings, the primary dangers for children in the Darien Gap were associated with three factors. First, the region's topography and fauna increased the risks of death or injury, such as drowning in rivers, falling because of muddy ground and high mountains, and being bitten or attacked by dangerous animals.<sup>23</sup> Three of the five interviewed caregivers reported that their children almost died while crossing rivers. In addition, long days of trekking reportedly placed demands on the physical capabilities of the children, and the inhospitable environment of the area made it difficult to access food and drinkable water. For these reasons, children were seen also to be at a high risk of dehydration, malnutrition, and gastrointestinal diseases.

Second, the presence of criminal groups and other perpetrators of violence controlling the region exposed people on the move to systematic theft of food and money, kidnapping, extortion, homicide, physical violence, and sexual violence.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the interviewed caregivers associated a risk of trauma with children's constant state of alertness due to the travel conditions, the high probability of seeing dead bodies (resulting from murder by criminal gangs, drownings, disease, etc), and the potential direct exposure to some violence or abuse.

One of the violations perceived and experienced most frequently in the Darien Gap (according to the interviews and surveys) was sexual abuse by members of host

communities, criminal gangs, and other migrants, mainly of girls and female adolescents but also of boys. Although sexual violence was more often identified as a danger for girls (cited by 29% of the respondents who identified the Darien Gap as the route's most dangerous location) than for boys (17%), boys and male adolescents were also victims of sexual violence during their passage through the region, according to the qualitative information from the interviews.

Given the risks faced by children in the Darien Gap, the respondents reported using additional protective measures, such as standing guard in shifts at night and cutting girls' hair to make them "look like" boys.

### **Fear of extortion, arrest, and harassment in Nicaragua**

Sixty-six of the 1,080 survey respondents (6%) who reported facing at least one risk on their journey identified Nicaragua as the most dangerous country for children on the route. These 66 caregivers included 16 of the 52 who started their route in Central America and the Caribbean after the Darien Gap.

The main perceived safety risks in Nicaragua for children were extortion (reported by 53% of the 66), kidnapping (52%), detention (41%) and harassment (36%). In the case of sexual violence, there was a much greater gender disparity, with 30% of these respondents reporting girls to be at risk, compared to 6% who said boys were at risk.

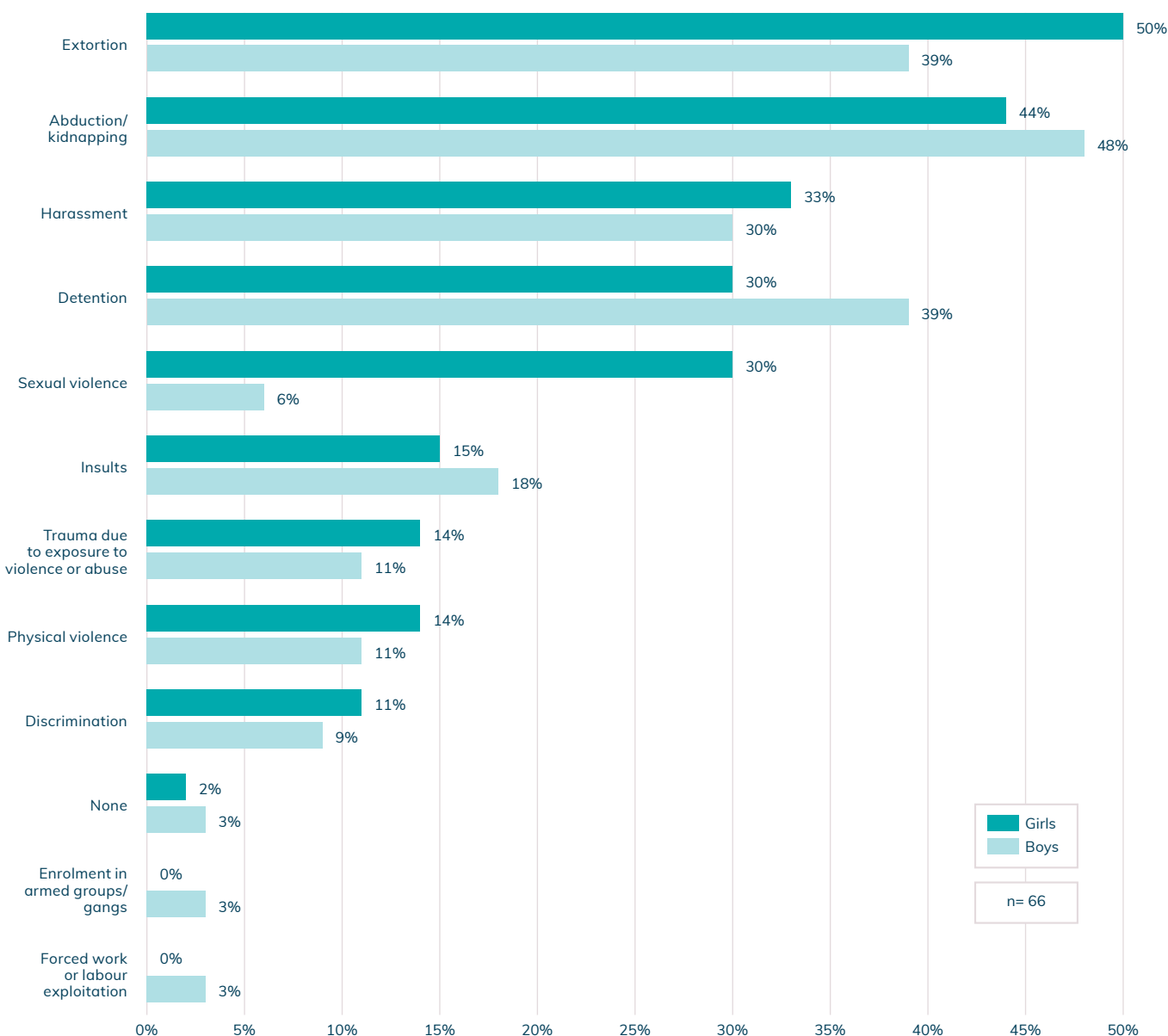
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23 National Geographic (2023) [Why is the Darien rainforest known as one of the most dangerous in the world?](#)

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

**Figure 7. Risks faced by boys and girls in Nicaragua**

4Mi survey responses from caregivers who reported Nicaragua to be the most dangerous country on the route



The riskiest place for children in Nicaragua—as identified by 45 (68%) of the 66 relevant respondents—was reported to be an area around Pajaro Negro through which migrants trek after crossing from Costa Rica, which lies about 70 kilometres from the border. Pajaro Negro has a migration inspection point, where 16 (36%) of these 45 caregivers said children risked detention. Risks of extortion (49%), kidnapping (44%), harassment (40%), and sexual violence (36%) for children were also reported in Pajaro Negro.

Furthermore, 27 (49%) of the 55 respondents who said Pajaro Negro was the most dangerous place in Nicaragua for all migrants identified criminal gangs as the main perpetrators of violence there. Other perceived perpetrators were people from the local community

(45%), and smugglers (29%).

The second most-cited area in Nicaragua seen to pose a great danger for children was Managua, mentioned by 11 (17%) of the 66, where the primary risks reported were the same as those at Pajaro Negro, with the addition of insults and discrimination.

### Honduras is seen as much less dangerous for children than other countries on the route

While 94% of respondents mentioned that the children in their care were exposed to at least one safety risk at some point during their migration journey, only 19% reported specific risks faced by children in Honduras.<sup>25</sup>

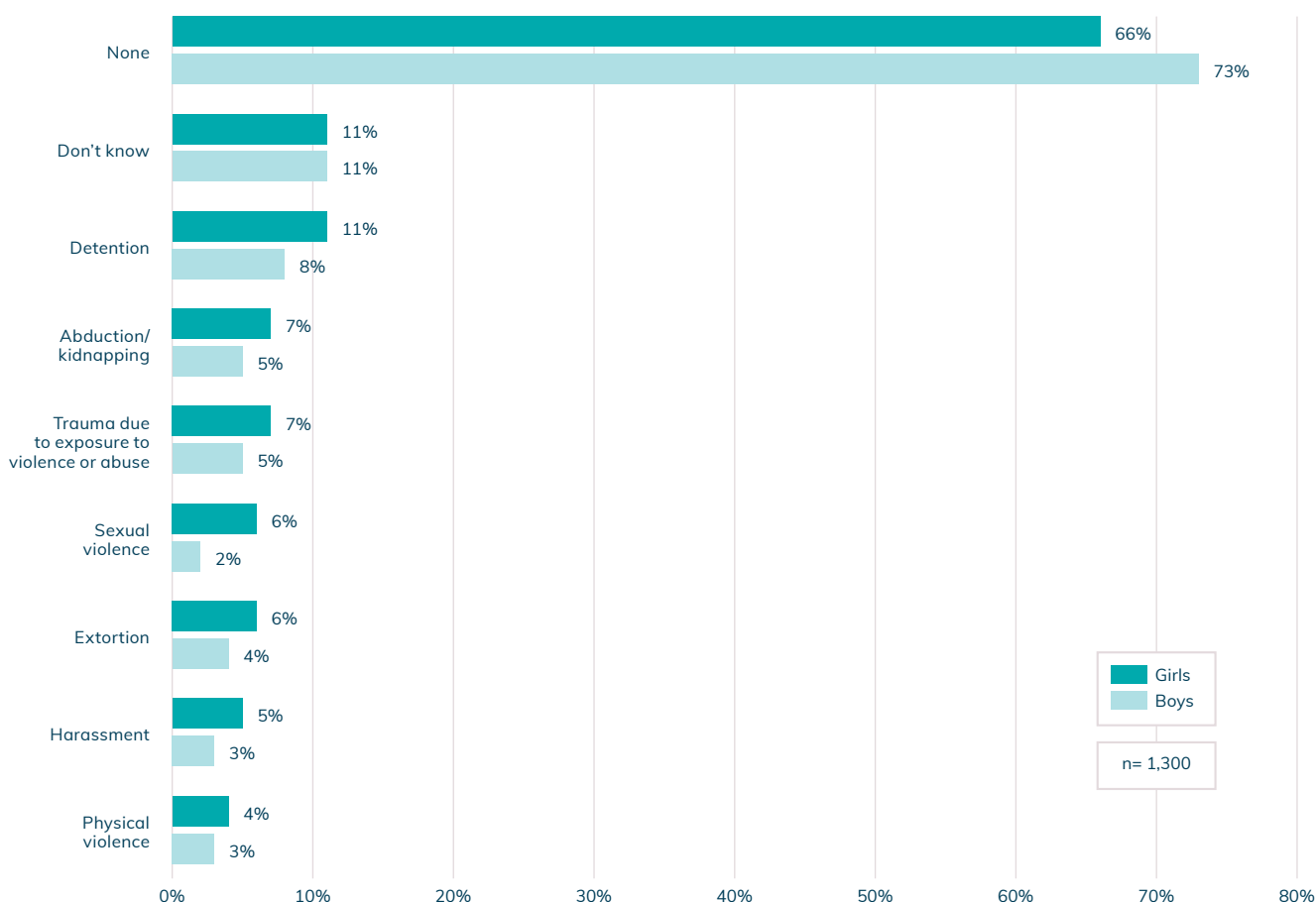
<sup>25</sup> In addition, 11% of respondents considered that children faced safety risks in Honduras but did not identify any.

Refugees and migrants on the move report that they feel safer in Honduras than in other countries, explaining that they are less exposed to safety risks there because, for most of them, transit through Honduras is very rapid: people try to cross the country in the shortest possible time and with the minimum number of stops.

Four of this study's five caregiver-interviewees said they

had been in Honduras for less than 24 hours and that they planned to leave for the Guatemalan border on the day of their interview, and one had been with his wife and daughter in Trojes (El Paraíso) for two weeks due to a lack of funds to continue their journey. None of the migrants interviewed reported a sense of insecurity in Honduras, and, in contrast to their stay in other countries, they had not experienced any xenophobic attacks.

**Figure 8. Risks faced by boys and girls in Honduras**  
4Mi survey responses



The most widely perceived safety risk to children in Honduras was detention, cited by 160 (12%) of the 1,300 survey respondents. Other dangers, reported in each case by less than 10% of the surveyed caregivers, included kidnapping, trauma due to exposure to violence or abuse, sexual violence (more for girls than for boys), extortion, and harassment.

The key informants rarely identified dangers associated with robbery and sexual violence in Honduras, but they did note that children travelling in groups that halted their journey in Honduras in order to finance subsequent legs faced a risk of child labour or of being made to beg. They also stated that some of the safety risks faced by children

on the overall migratory route may have materialised in Honduras; these included injuries due to travel conditions, and sexual, physical, and/or psychological violence perpetrated by their adult travelling companions or others in the transit country. Other organizations in the area have additionally identified risks of malnutrition and discrimination.<sup>26</sup>

The locations of Honduras that key informants reported as being dangerous for children were mostly urban areas, such as Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and, at night, the Tatumbla bus terminal, which criminal groups control.

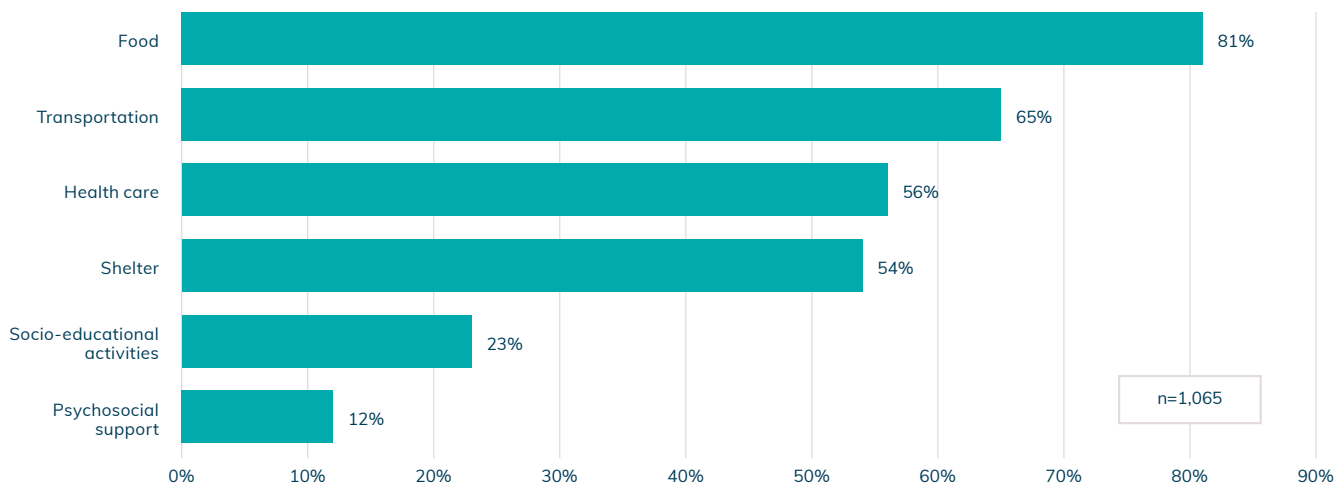
26 United Nations Honduras (2023) [The Humanitarian Network of Honduras calls to strengthen joint action to provide urgent response to migrants and refugees in transit through Honduran territory.](#)

## Humanitarian needs upon arrival in Honduras are significant

A large majority (82%) of survey respondents stated that the children with whom they were travelling arrived

in Honduras with humanitarian needs. The sectors in which they identified the greatest needs were food, transportation, shelter, and health.

**Figure 9. Children’s humanitarian needs on arrival in Honduras**  
4Mi survey responses from caregivers who mentioned at least one need



In addition, key informants identified needs related to food, protection, and physical and mental healthcare, and noted that children often arrived in Honduras with a range of health problems, such as injuries, malnutrition, dehydration, sunstroke, diarrhoea, and fever. Such migrants usually have limited access to food and water, and their previous travel conditions and episodes of violence have psychological impacts and interrupt proper childhood long-term development.<sup>27</sup>

The research conducted for this study shows that, despite their relatively brief transit through the country, children arriving in Honduras have many critical humanitarian needs. These could pose a challenge to organisations providing humanitarian aid, which have established a presence in high-traffic areas such as transportation terminals and institutional registration points.

## Migration undermines routines, social ties and education

Almost all (94%) of the 840 respondents travelling with children over five years of age reported that their charges were not attending any type of educational or childcare facility at the time of the survey. In most (82%) cases, this was because the length of stay in Honduras was too short; a small minority (14%) said they lacked sufficient information about available services. Fifteen percent of the respondents said they had started their journey more

than two months before the survey, and 45% had been travelling for one month.

Other research has shown that lack of schooling during the migration process generates social, territorial, and cultural losses, gaps in learning cycles, and consequent school dropouts and educational lags.<sup>28</sup>

Some of those surveyed commented that the children with whom they were travelling still did not know how to read and write by the age of seven or eight because their schooling had been interrupted several times.

The interruption of schooling is only one of the breaks in routine that occur during prolonged migratory journeys.<sup>29</sup> The interviewed caregivers also highlighted the rupture of social ties with family and friends and the loss of routines of play, care, and attention that they had with their children before starting their migration. The stress of the journey and the challenging conditions hindered the quality time that the caregivers could spend with the children and reduced the possibility of engaging in stimulating activities. All this affected the children’s social and cognitive development in the medium and long term.

27 UNICEF (2023b) [Childhood at risk: The changing face of migrant children in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region like no other](#). (Page 16).

28 UNESCO (2019) [Global education monitoring report summary: Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls](#).

29 Ayuda en Acción (2023) [My rights travel with me: For the human right to education of children and adolescents in transit](#).

## Trauma and the need for psychosocial care are common

*“She wakes up at night because she has nightmares about the jungle; she always dreams that she drowns because the river almost carries her away.”*

### 31-year-old female caregiver, referring to her 8-year-old daughter

In addition to the disruptions to routines and social ties noted above, migration under any circumstances involves psychological and social losses that can create a form of distress known as “migratory grief” or “migratory mourning”.<sup>30</sup> The social and personal circumstances that arise during migration often make it difficult to process these losses, and can thus adversely affect mental health. Moreover, these losses are compounded by the incidents and abuses that migrating children face—not only risks of experiencing harm themselves but also of witnessing traumatic scenes—and by the stress caused by a constant state of alertness or anxiety, as well as by the violence or dangers they may have endured before departure.

Recent research conducted by UNICEF shows that that migratory routes through Latin America are highly stressful for children and that “prolonged exposure to traumatic situations [...] can provoke a prolonged release of cortisol, the stress hormone, which damages the brain’s functionality” and that this has a long-term impact on a child’s development.<sup>31</sup>

Research for this MMC/CDH study found that migratory grief and violent episodes had had psychological impacts—such as sadness, mood swings, anxiety, nightmares, and sleeping difficulties—on the children in charge of the surveyed and interviewed caregivers. Likewise, the key informants identified mental health care as a primary need of children in transit through the continent.

Nevertheless, only 12% of the respondents reported that the children with whom they were travelling needed psychosocial attention. Although they were aware of the problem, most did not explicitly identify the need for mental healthcare. This may have been due to prioritising basic and immediate needs, such as food and transportation.

The caregivers also referred to strategies they implemented along the route to protect children’s mental health. These included encouraging them to think of the decision to migrate and the situations experienced along the route as adventures; telling children to cover their eyes and creating distractions to avoid exposing them to situations that are difficult to process, such as the presence of dead bodies; and maintaining social contact with family and friends through phone or video calls.

## Conclusions

Since 2021, mixed migratory movements of children through Honduras have been increasing steadily. Most of these movements originate from South America, and especially Venezuela. However, the increase in departures from Central America and the Caribbean and from Asian and African countries is also significant.

This study’s findings suggest that migration through the Americas is taking a harsh toll on children’s health—particularly their mental health—and that needs are not being met. A lack of records and data makes it difficult to accurately measure the children’s migratory dynamics and the scale and scope of this issue. The under-registration of deaths and disappearances of children along the route (as well as of other violent incidents) has contributed to a troubling information gap, which is particularly wide in the case of unaccompanied and separated minors.

This study underlines the importance of continuing to generate evidence about the experiences and needs of migrant and refugee children in the Latin America and Caribbean region and to contribute to providing timely, adequate, and effective responses.

30 See for example: González Calvo, V. (2005) [Duelo Migratorio](#). Trabajo social; and Blanco C (2023) [What is migratory grief? Can migrants ever overcome their sense of loss and displacement?](#) SBS.

31 UNICEF (2023b) [Childhood at risk: The changing face of migrant children in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region like no other](#). (Page 10).



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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