



December 2025

**YOU CAN'T STAY  
BUT YOU CAN'T GO:**

**STATE VIOLENCE AT THE  
UK-FRANCE BORDER**

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Published 2 December 2025

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**In memory of all those who have lost their lives  
hoping for safety at the UK-France border and borders  
around the world, and in solidarity with all survivors  
of the racist global border regime.**

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## CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS



**Humans for Rights Network** is a needs-led human rights organisation based in the UK and working across the UK and northern France. We provide high quality investigative casework across the UK to people placed at risk by the UK asylum system. We also engage in strategic litigation to directly challenge unlawful practices within UK asylum and migration systems as well as monitoring the impact of UK border policy at the UK/France border.

For more information about our work, see [humansforrights.org](https://humansforrights.org).

This report was a collaborative project, with many partner organisations who contributed through sharing their own qualitative and quantitative research with us, speaking to us in interviews, welcoming us to their organisation to speak to people with lived experience of the border, and offering logistical support. Thank you to all of these organisations:

### CONTRIBUTORS FROM NORTHERN FRANCE



**L'Auberge des Migrants** has been working at the UK-France border since 2008 to provide material aid, advocacy work and support for other solidarity organisations. They currently run two material aid projects, Channel Info Project and the Woodyard, as well as the logistics of a large shared warehouse, home to many Calais organisations.



**Utopia 56** is a nationwide French charity meeting the needs of people on the move and seeking asylum throughout different cities in France. In Calais and Grand Synthe, they provide emergency support for people on the move, including after failed crossing attempts and shipwrecks.



**Human Rights Observers** was founded in 2017 as an independent watchdog to document and denounce state violence perpetrated against people on the move at the UK-France border.



**Médecins du Monde** is a French medical charity. They have a health project in Dunkirk which offers medical care and support, as well as spaces for psychosocial support.



**Médecins sans Frontières** is a French and international medical charity. They work in Calais to offer medical support, a day centre for unaccompanied children, and psychological support.



**Secours-Catholique Caritas France** is a charity which works to support people in poverty around France and internationally. In Calais, their principle action is to run a day centre which people on the move can access regularly, with separate space for women and children.



**Channel Info Project** is a project of L'Auberge des Migrants. They offer phone charging, WiFi, SIM cards and information to people on the move in Calais and Dunkirk.



**Maria Skobtsova House** is a welcome house for women and children in Calais. It offers short term stays for those at the UK-France border who are particularly vulnerable.



**Project Play** is a French organisation which provides a mobile play service for children aged 0-18 in Calais and Dunkirk, as well as offering safeguarding support to families. Project Play also carries out advocacy projects to empower the voices of children at the border.



**Calais Food Collective** is a French organisation which provides food and water access for people on the move in Calais. They also co-ordinate litter picks and advocacy projects around access to fundamental rights.



**Alarmphone** is an organisation which works across different borders in the Mediterranean and Europe. It is an emergency phone line which people can call if they are unable to contact the emergency services. Alarmphone also documents the violence people are met with at these borders.



**Calais Migrant Solidarity** is a collective created in 2009 as part of the No Borders network. They work for the destruction of systems of border oppression through a variety of solidarity actions.



**La Margelle** is a welcome house in Calais, run by the Ubuntu charity. They welcome people on the move who are unable to access shelter, particularly people who have been injured.



**Refugee Women's Centre** is a French organisation supporting women and families on the move in Calais and Dunkirk. They provide material aid as well as safeguarding and psychosocial support.



The **French Red Cross** is a branch of the international charity. It operates in Calais and Dunkirk with support for unaccompanied children, health support, phone charging and family reunion links.

## ORGANISATIONS WHO OFFERED LOGISTICAL SUPPORT



**Plateforme des Soutiens aux Migrants** is a French organisation providing legal and advocacy support for people on the move and organisations working at the border.



The **Cross Border Forum** is a network of organisations working on the question of the border within Belgium, France and the UK. They also offer logistical and funding support to organisations creating change in the border space.

## ORGANISATIONS WHO WELCOMED US TO SPEAK TO PEOPLE IN THE UK



**Derbyshire Refugee Solidarity** is a grassroots organisation working to provide support to refugees and asylum seekers in Derby. They provide support and advice alongside English classes, psychosocial activities and bike repairs.



**Bradford Immigration and Asylum Support and Advice Network** (BIASAN) is a collective providing practical and social support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Their services include gym group, English classes and women's club.



**Birmingham Community Hosting Network** (BIRCH) are a charity in Birmingham who offer friendship support to people seeking sanctuary in Birmingham.



**Manchester Refugee Support Network** (MRSN) provide legal advice and health and wellbeing support for refugees and asylum seekers in Manchester.



**Sheffield City of Sanctuary** are a charity who provide a range of services for refugees and asylum seekers across Sheffield, including a multi-agency drop-in in the city centre.



**Baobab Women** are an organisation who empower refugee and migrant women in the West Midlands to understand their rights and help themselves through advocacy, policy work, information sharing and wellbeing work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the following people for their help with this project:

**Libby Kane and the Cross Border Forum**, for invaluable practical and moral support;

**Alexandre Léchenet** from Politico, for helping us navigate the French public information system and constant generosity in information sharing;

**Megan Sethuraman**, who interned with us on the project and carried out interviews with care and compassion;

All of the **interpreters and translators** who made the communication of the project possible;

All of the **wonderful partner organisations** whose solidarity and support enabled us to write this report;

**And above all, thank you to the individuals who trusted us to share their experiences in this report. We hope we have done your stories justice.**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**“When you are here waiting to get to the UK, you will suffer.”**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

2024 was the deadliest year ever at the UK-France border, with NGOs also witnessing increased levels of non-fatal violence throughout 2024 and 2025, following the transfer of hundreds of millions by the UK to France to ‘secure its border’ and prevent people from crossing to the UK.

Humans for Rights Network has been working on both sides of this border for 10 years, during which time we have witnessed an increase in such violence, alongside an expansion of those responsible and the locations at which it takes place. This report details the violence people on the move experience and why the UK and French governments are responsible for it.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Life for people on the move at the UK-France border is characterised by widespread state violence largely perpetrated by police officers.
- The UK government funds a proportion of this violence and instigates violent policies through bilateral agreements with France as part of their increasing border securitisation. Since 2018, the UK government has pledged at least 763.4 million euros to the French government to 'secure' the border.
- People can't stay safely at the northern French border due to the hostile 'zero point of fixation' policy enacted through constant encampment eviction operations and random police violence.
- People can't safely leave France to cross to the UK due to a lack of safe routes and police repression of crossing attempts.
- Both the UK and French governments have failed to ensure transparency and accountability about funding, operations and violence at the border. People rarely report police violence due to lengthy and unworkable processes that involve reporting to the police themselves.
- Reduced numbers of boats making it to the border (due to confiscations throughout Europe as they are being transported to the Channel) and an increase in police violence cause chaos at embarkation that has led to overcrowding and deaths by crushing.
- Since 2020, crossings to the UK by small boat have outnumbered crossings by lorry. However, people including unaccompanied children continue to use lorries to attempt to cross to the UK, leading to several cases of death and serious injury each year.
- The use of tear gas and other forms of violence by police are endemic, with people enduring this violence in a variety of circumstances whilst at the UK-France border, including during evictions, crossing attempts and at random when travelling around the coastal area of Northern France. This violence is used indiscriminately, including when children are present.
- Measures adopted by the UK government to protect the border and curb 'irregular' migration have only caused danger and harm - they have not eliminated the need for people to cross to the UK, but only made it more dangerous for people to do so.
- The more the UK and French governments securitise the border, the more people must rely on smuggling networks to cross it. Violence used by smugglers around crossings has increased as police interventions have become more frequent and intense. Higher levels of police presence means crossings take place under much higher pressure, increasing the violence between those organising crossings and those relying on them.

**Section 1 - Methodology** introduces the report and lays out the methodology on which it is based. The report was compiled from a patchwork of different qualitative and quantitative evidence collected directly by Humans for Rights Network, independent researchers, and NGOs working at the border. Section 1 also explores the difficulties encountered in this work. This includes missing data either deliberately obscured by the UK and French governments or never collected by either state. Other barriers were the difficulties people had discussing traumatic events, whether because it was too distressing to do so or due to the normalisation of violence against people as they cross borders. The term ‘people on the move’ is used throughout the report to refer to those staying at and attempting to cross the border.

**Section 2 - Contextualising the UK-France Border** demonstrates how the UK and French governments fund violence at the border and instigate violent policies through bilateral agreements.

**“It’s a problem from the government on both sides”**

- Mustafa, who we met in Calais in September 2025

It shows how, through bilateral agreements, the UK and France are jointly responsible for policy and funding of the border, both through state and private sector operations. UK funding equips police officers and buys surveillance equipment. In 2025, French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau stated that of 1,200 law enforcement officers at the border each day, 730 are paid for by the UK government. However, the exact use of UK funding by France is concealed by both the French and UK governments. Despite repeated attempts by HFRN and partners, we have been unable to obtain clear financial records detailing exactly how this money is being spent. The UK government also spends huge sums of money on ‘securing’ the border through a wide range of contracts with private companies, amounting to at least £3.5 billion between 2018 and 2025. Meanwhile, French government spending focuses on violent policing (85%) rather than reception of people at the border (15%).

Section 2 also examines how colonial histories, cultural ties, family links and migration policies across Europe are contributing factors in people’s decisions to come to the UK. Due to the Dublin III Regulation, people who have sought asylum in EU countries and been refused, or who have been unable to find safety in Europe due to violence and inhumane treatment, are unable to apply elsewhere in the EU, so left without choice but to travel onwards. 2025 has seen the closure of several safe routes to the UK, including refugee family reunion, which were already insufficient but provided much needed support. As such, seeking asylum in the UK is only becoming more difficult.

**“Most of the time people are coming from their homeland because of a difficult situation... sometimes political instability, natural disaster, or war, something like that... so we don’t have any kind of choice.”**

- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025

**Section 3 - Violence in Public Transport** shows how transport networks have become a key site of state violence against people on the move in recent years.

**“There are always a lot of police at the central station to catch people - on the train and the bus. They come looking and then they take people. They are there morning, night, afternoon - all the time.”**

- Yousef, who we met in Calais in September 2025

In attempting to deter people from crossing, French police have begun to include transport networks as targets in their operations, using racial profiling. The increased policing of transport networks puts people at risk of racial harassment, stop and search, violence and arrest. High police presence in transport networks also impedes people's asylum applications within France. Police threaten people with tear gas, unleashing police dogs and shouting within trains and other transport links. In 2024, Human Rights Observers recorded 28 violent police operations linked to transport. This included at least 44 arrests, 8 stop and search operations and 11 identity check operations.

**Section 4 - Life at the Border - “You Can't Stay”** explores how in living sites and anywhere in Calais and Dunkirk, people are subject to unsafe living conditions, systematic police violence through eviction cycles, and random police violence. People feel they 'can't stay' in France, a deliberate state policy of attempted deterrence.

**“We are not safe without enough food, shelter and blankets.”**

- Nabil, who we met in Calais in September 2025.

Unsafe living conditions are deliberately created by the state, through a total lack of adequate shelter and the failure to meet basic human rights such as food and hygiene provision. Police undermine these rights by sabotaging the work of NGOs, for example confiscating and damaging water tanks. Deliberate hostile design has pushed people's informal living sites further from city centres and the support offered by NGOs. This includes the use of rocks to block people from pitching tents. Inescapable surveillance means people are afforded no right to privacy. People also suffer significant illness and injury due to unsafe living conditions: medical charity Médecins du Monde report that 88% of treatment they provided in 2023 were a consequence of living conditions.

**“The police there are like soldiers but without guns - it's like a war”**

- Moussa, who lived in Calais in December 2024

French police regularly evict informal living sites, implementing a 'zero points of fixation' policy that entails confiscating people's belongings and creating a sense of instability, with devastating psychological consequences. HRO observed over 800 evictions at the border in 2024, affecting at least 16,365 people. Belongings including medication, prescriptions and asylum claim documents are often confiscated during evictions. Evictions also see the use of other forms of violence such as tear gas, random arrests (at least 209 during 2024) and flashball bullets. The number of evictions increased significantly in Dunkirk in 2025. According to local authorities, this increase was financed by UK funding from successive bilateral agreements.

**"It's not right what the police did. But we're not going to complain. Who are we going to complain to?"**

*- Jamal, who witnessed police brutality in March 2025*

Random police violence, including physical attacks, is common in Calais and Dunkirk.

Between March and September 2025, Utopia 56 recorded **680 people affected by police violence** outside of crossing attempts: an average of **97 people per month, or over 3 per day**.

People are unable or unwilling to report police violence for a number of reasons, including the involvement of police in complaints procedures. Arrests and police custody are also violent and often involve racism and xenophobia from police. Police violence creates an atmosphere of instability and constant danger for people on the move, making it clear they cannot stay safely in France.

**Section 5 - Crossings from France to the UK - "You Can't Leave"** shows how people experience high levels of violence during crossing attempts. This includes during dangerous lorry crossings; at the hands of smuggling networks who exist predominantly due to the lack of safe routes; through police interventions around small boat crossings; and through the lack of support and dignity afforded people during shipwreck, death and disappearance. People find they 'can't leave' France.

**"I knew it was dangerous, but there was no other way. [...] So I jumped up between the front of the lorry and the back anyway."**

*- Salim, who we met in Calais in August 2024*

People still attempt to cross the border by lorry, especially when they cannot afford to pay for a small boat crossing. This means unaccompanied minors, among others, are particularly vulnerable to attempting lorry crossings. During lorry crossing attempts, people are at risk of violence from police, private security and drivers trying to prevent them from entering lorries.

Boat crossings are an inherently dangerous way to cross the Channel which people are forced to rely on due to the lack of safe routes to the UK. Boat crossings have been made increasingly dangerous through growing police violence on northern French beaches.

The UK government funds this violence and instigates violent policies through bilateral agreements with France as part of their increasingly hostile border policies. This causation takes place both directly, through UK government funding of violent police operations, and indirectly, through violence that exists because UK government policy puts people at risk and allows violence to flourish.

**“Most people die from drowning because when they see French police they will run to the boat. In between that [the shore and the boat] most people die because they don’t want to be caught by French police. When people are trying to board small boats, the police come and people run in fear from the police.”**

*- Haddish, a woman who spent 5 weeks in Dunkirk*

In 2025, Utopia 56 recorded **police violence related to crossings against 7 people per day** on average.

Police routinely use tear gas and flashballs against people trying to board boats, and slash boats in and out of the water with knives. Increased police surveillance and violence means embarking happens in more chaos and panic, which is a factor in boats becoming overcrowded, leading to death and serious injury by crushing or drowning in shallow waters.

Family separation is another result of panic and chaos on the beaches. These violent consequences are a result of increased securitisation of the border, undertaken by the French and UK governments and funded by both of them. In 2025, attempts by the UK government to introduce even more violent policies such as intervening in the water up to 300m from the coast show the state’s commitment to securitisation at the cost of people’s safety.

**“They will...[take a] gun, fire the boat and the people will... run inside the water, some run outside the water, some of them run over there, and there will be instability”**

*- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025*

Police often fail to take action when people are in danger or go missing in the water. This can lead to injury and death.

**“Once we were on the boat, I asked about my friend. I said, ‘where is Abdo? I lost my friend.’ The rescue people said ‘we have already found two dead people, but we don’t know anything about your friend.’ [...] They said we would see about this later.”**

- Munir, who we met in Calais in August 2024

The French and UK governments have prioritised surveillance to criminalise people rather than increasing search and rescue capacity. This means people are left at risk when shipwrecks happen, and that the state is responsible for deaths at the border. By prioritising criminalisation over the protection of life, states bear direct responsibility for deaths at the border. This is heavily demonstrated in the fact that 2024 was the most lethal year yet with at least 89 deaths, up from at least 27 in 2023 and at least 20 in 2022.

Nonetheless, state services fail to support the families of those who die or go missing at the border. In cases of death, procedures to identify, recover and bury or repatriate the bodies of the dead are often excessively slow, causing great suffering for the bereaved. Disappearances are often not accounted for by the state and little to no effort goes into recovering the missing.

Smuggling networks have grown as the UK and French government’s securitisation of the border has been reinforced. Increased difficulty to cross independently means people must rely on smugglers to help them cross. Smugglers often subject people to extreme as well as routine violence, both in living sites and during crossing attempts. The violent policing of smuggling networks often target people who are not involved in these networks, during camp raids and crossing attempts.

**“There was a small hole in the boat from the beginning. We tried to tell the people who managed the boat that we couldn’t go because of the hole [...] But they said we had to go [...] They threatened us all with violence - these people, they have guns [...] So the driver tried to go anyway.”**

- Munir, who we met in Calais in August 2024

People accused of driving small boats across the Channel are increasingly being criminalised as smugglers in France and the UK, despite the fact that they often do so in exchange for passage or under duress, and are not involved in smuggling networks.

**Section 6 - After Crossing Attempts** demonstrates that violence does not end when people attempt to cross the border. In both France and the UK, people continue to be subjected to violence at the hands of the state. People are treated inhumanely in France after failed crossing attempts, including by being detained and questioned for hours after witnessing deaths without basic needs being met.

While medical care is available at the border, the French authorities do not always provide access to medical care for people who have just experienced a shipwreck or other failed crossing attempt.

**“Following a shipwreck on 19 October 2024, several women were burned by the boat's engine and were unable to receive immediate medical attention upon their return to the beach or port. They only received medical care later that day because they managed to reach the hospital and because we were able to accompany them.”**

- Refugee Women's Centre

Moreover, medical services often fail to provide adequate interpretation, meaning people often cannot access healthcare adequately.

Many people who experience border violence are unable to or feel unsafe attempting to seek justice for violence they may have faced, as French police prioritise targeting smugglers over supporting victims.

**“When we arrived in the UK, the British coastguards didn't treat us as human. They just pulled us by our clothes, pushed us, and forced us to sit with their hands when they wanted us to sit.”**

- Mahmoud, an unaccompanied teenager who arrived in the UK in March 2025

**Section 7 - Ending The Violence** concludes the report and lays out our recommendations to end violence at the border. These are organised into three themes - urgent action to save lives, transparency and accountability, and broader system change.

**Appendix** - Included as an appendix to the report is a timeline which details the extent of UK-France co-operation in recent years, including bilateral agreements and funding. It also tracks how, alongside this, violence and death at the border has increased, as well as the increase in evictions under the 'zero point of fixation' policy. It seeks to show the correlation between increased securitisation of the border coupled with increasingly hostile political rhetoric and asylum policies on both sides of the Channel, and the increase in death and injury at the border. It spans 2018 - 2025.

*Names and information of those killed at the UK-France border, was taken from Calais Migrant Solidarity - Deaths at the Calais Border, a record kept since 2002. Names are only published by CMS where consent has been obtained from relatives or friends.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

#### Emergency Response

- The UK and French governments, with support of the Calais group, must **review the search and rescue capacity** currently available from both sides of the Channel. Both governments must commit to funding and organising increased search and rescue capacity as required. This must be genuine search and rescue and must not be aimed at or used for the surveillance and criminalisation of people on the move.
- The French and UK governments must **plan, fund and provide adapted support to survivors** of shipwrecks/failed crossings, including shelter, food, drink, and first response; adapted psychological support; ending violent treatment of survivors including arrest and interrogation.
- The UK and French governments must **commit to searching for missing people**, creating more capacity through increased funding and planning where needed.

#### Reception in France

- The UK and French governments must **collaborate to create and fund a dignified and safe reception for people on the move in northern France**, including shelter, access to food, water and hygiene services, and access to adapted safeguarding support.
- The French authorities must **ensure the provision of adequate interpretation services** across all emergency services and medical providers in northern France. They must also **ensure people can access medical services** without fear of being detained by police.
- The UK and French governments must **divert spending on militarisation to provide humanitarian assistance**, with a group convened including experts by experience and NGOs to determine adequate use of this funding.

#### Limiting harm

- The UK and French governments must **commit to not implementing violent police actions which will endanger life**, such as pullbacks or interventions in the water.

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

#### Funding and policy

- The UK parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee or Public Accounts Committee must **conduct an inquiry into UK spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies, to establish how taxpayer's money has been used.
- The UK and French governments must **publish all contracts, financial data and monitoring processes related to spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies. This must include detailed accounts of how money is spent and how the impact of spending is monitored by the UK government.
- The UK and French governments must **release all policy, practice and operation documents that relate to securitisation of the border**.

- The UK and French governments must **create a monitoring framework based in international human rights law** to ensure any future policy and spending on border security does not contravene human rights.

## Deaths and disappearances

- The UK and French governments must **jointly publish regular data about those who have died and gone missing in the Channel and at the border**, including age, sex and nationality. The UK government should accept Nadia Whittome's proposed amendment to the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to ensure this provision.
- The UK and French governments must **pause all security spending at the UK-France border until a statutory inquiry into the increase in violence and deaths since the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty** is carried out. This investigation should seek to establish how UK funding contributed to an increase in border-violence, including the rise in power of smugglers in response to heightened security and lack of safe routes .

## Responding to violence

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.
- The UK and French governments must **offer dignified administrative and practical support to the families and friends of those who have died or gone missing** at the border.

# BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

## Ending state violence

- The UK and French governments must **work together to end the 'zero point of fixation' policy** (enacted by widespread violent evictions), **including ending UK funding** for these operations.
- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations in France**, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.
- The UK and French governments must **end violent police interceptions of crossing attempts**, whether by small boat or lorry. **Both governments must end their funding** of these operations.

## Access to asylum

- The UK and French governments must **end the 'one in, one out' scheme immediately and permanently and immediately return all those removed to France**.
- The UK government must **repeal the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and end the practice of criminalising people for arriving at the border**. This practice contravenes the UK's obligations under international law, and does not have the purported 'deterrence' effect. It should also **remove clauses 13-18 of the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill** to prevent any further criminalisation of people seeking safety.
- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

# 1

# INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

## 1.a. INTRODUCTION

**“I experienced a lot of things there...when I think about it it brings me pain.”**

*- Dehab, a woman who spent 2 months in Calais*

**“When you are here waiting to get to the UK, you will suffer.”**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

2024 was the deadliest year ever at the UK-France border, with NGOs also witnessing increased levels of non-fatal violence throughout 2024 and 2025. Humans for Rights Network (HFRN) has been working on both sides of this border for 10 years, during which time we have witnessed an increase in such violence, alongside an expansion of actors responsible for it and of the locations at which it takes place.

During 2023, we noticed a marked increase in reports of violence from clients who had arrived in the UK: through our casework we began receiving numerous proactive reports of violent incidents experienced by people who had passed through the UK-France border to arrive in the UK after having spent time in the North of France.

During 2024 and 2025, Humans for Rights Network and Dr Maria Hagan conducted interviews **with people with lived experience of trying to cross the UK-France border, primarily focused on the violence** they experienced there. We have found **high levels of state violence against people throughout their time at the border**, as well as significant violence from non-state actors which are able to exist due to the negative conditions fostered by the state at the border and by **state neglect**.

Our report presents these findings, centring the voices of those with direct lived experience of violence and including contributions from over ten organisations working along the UK-France border, alongside our own investigations and casework. It explores how violence shapes every stage of people's time at the border — from life within informal living sites to the dangers surrounding crossing attempts, whether by boat or lorry.

Section 2 provides analysis of two key contextual points: the way in which UK funding and policy cause the violent securitisation of the border, and the reasons people attempt to travel to the UK to seek safety.

We then trace how life at the border is defined by a central contradiction: people are not able to stay in France safely due to evictions, harassment and poor living conditions, yet are violently prevented from leaving French territory to reach the UK. As Samir, who we spoke to in Calais in September 2025, put it:

**“You don’t know if they want you to stay here or go out of the country. They won’t make it easy for you to stay here and get your papers. So you can’t stay here, but you can’t get to the UK.”**

*- Samir, who we spoke to in Calais in September 2025*

Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, similarly described:

**“People are not welcome here, yet we do not let them leave either. So it is a kind of paradoxical madness at the border where people are stuck without being welcomed with dignity, but without being allowed to leave either.”**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

This report follows border violence in roughly the order people experience it when attempting to cross to the UK. We begin with national and local transport networks in northern France (Section 3), before turning to the ways in which people “can’t stay” as violence targets them in their informal living sites (Section 4). We then examine how people “can’t leave,” as securitisation of the border renders attempts to cross to the UK violent and dangerous (Section 5). Finally, we analyse how this violence persists even after crossing attempts, both in the UK and in France (Section 6).

The UK government funds this violence and instigates violent policies through bilateral agreements with France as part of their increasingly hostile border policies. This causation takes place both directly, through UK government funding of violent police operations, and indirectly, through violence that exists because UK government policy puts people at risk and allows violence to flourish.

This report exposes the clear and causal link between UK funding and violence against people on the move at the UK-France border, and how militarisation and neglect has caused years of harm and abuse, with no publicly available monitoring of the impact of this spending or policies to speak of. Since 2018, the UK government has pledged **at least 763.4 million euros** to the French government to ‘secure’ the border.

This is not to disavow the role of the French government in perpetrating and co-ordinating this violence: however, it is important to recognise that ultimately, the French government is acting in the supposed interests of the UK government when it carries out these acts in an attempt to secure the border. Therefore any attempt to reduce violence and improve the lives of people trying to cross the border must address UK policy as the fundamental cause. The Appendix of our report is a timeline which provides a contextual overview of UK and French policy alongside violent incidents at the border, and demonstrates the causal link between them.

In its most acute form, this violence leads to death. As mentioned above, the number of people dying at the UK-France border reached its peak in 2024, yet the UK government's response was to issue additional funding to 'secure the UK-France Border'. Inhumane, unworkable and hostile policies and legislation such as the Illegal Migration Act and Rwanda plan were announced and implemented in an attempt to 'stop the boats' and deter people from crossing the Channel. No steps were taken to protect life.

This is a trend that we have seen continue under this new Labour government, this time under the slogan 'smash the gangs'. With no policies in sight that will end the need for people to make dangerous journeys or improve their situations at the border, violence is a daily occurrence.

We seek to expose the reality of life for people at the border whilst calling on the UK Government to urgently revise its policies to protect life and prevent future harm. As Channel crossings come under increasing political scrutiny in the UK, this report is necessary to show the reality of people's experiences at the UK-France border and the ways in which UK border security funding and policy harm people seeking safety.

### 1.b. METHODOLOGY

This report was compiled from a patchwork of different sources of evidence. This includes: qualitative research carried out by Lily MacTaggart on behalf of Humans for Rights Network and by Dr Maria Hagan from the University of Amsterdam; qualitative data collected by Florencia Doglioli in her masters' thesis research; qualitative and quantitative data from contributing organisations working at the border; and reports, articles, and websites documenting incidents at the border.

The collective research period for this report was August 2024 - September 2025, but the report also draws on analysis and experience from Humans for Rights Network's extensive experience working at the UK/France border for over ten years. More data was available from 2024, as many organisations had published annual reports which were useful sources. However, this does not indicate that 2025 was a less violent year at the border.

**All names of people on the move with lived experience of the border are pseudonyms.**

## RESEARCH METHODS USED

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH BY HUMANS FOR RIGHTS NETWORK

We used a range of qualitative research methods in our work. To meet people with lived experience of border violence, we travelled to a range of asylum drop-in spaces around the UK and also spoke with people at the Secours Catholique day centre in Calais. Our qualitative research is based on long form interviews, conversational interviews, group discussions and information provided by existing clients of HFRN through its casework.

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH BY MARIA HAGAN

Maria Hagan is a researcher in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She has been carrying out qualitative research at the France-UK border since 2017, and since 2023 has been working on an NWO-funded project specifically focused on the injury and death of people on the move in this context [VI.Veni.221S.159]. For this project, she has been interviewing people who have been injured at or disabled by this border, as well as people who are involved in supporting the deceased and bereaved when people die at the border.

### FLORENCIA DOGLIOLI - MASTERS' THESIS

Florence Doglioli carried out a four month ethnographic study about the experience of women on the border between October and January 2024/2025. During this time, she lived at Maria Skobtsova house, where she observed and worked with women to understand and record their experiences. She used qualitative research methods, including a photo-voice project, to record the experiences of women. We have used quotes from the women she worked with. They are presented with an initial rather than a pseudonym. We would like to thank Florence for letting us use her research, which has added valuable insight into women's experiences at the border in particular.

### QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA FROM ORGANISATIONS WORKING AT THE BORDER

We carried out interviews with employees and volunteers from the following organisations: L'Auberge des Migrants, Utopia 56, Human Rights Observers (HRO), Médecins du Monde (MdM), Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Secours Catholique, Channel Info Project (CHIP), Maria Skobtsova House, French Red Cross and another safe house in Grand Synthe, Dunkirk. We used quantitative and qualitative data shared by Project Play, Calais Food Collective, Alarmphone, Calais Migrant Solidarity, Utopia 56, HRO, La Maison Margelle welcome house, and Refugee Women's Centre.

We are grateful to all of these partners for their participation in this project. Solidarity and collaboration are crucial to working against borders and we are proud to be part of such a community.

### EXISTING PUBLICATIONS

We used a large range of existing publications to research and evidence this report. These are many and varied in content and perspective, from NGOs working at the border to organised crime thinktanks. A list of some of existing research about the border can be accessed [here](#).

## NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Throughout this report, we use the term 'people on the move' to refer to people in northern France who are seeking to cross the UK-France border. Of those that do cross the Channel, the vast majority of people go on to seek asylum in the UK with others claiming asylum in France.<sup>1</sup> Using the term 'asylum seekers' or 'refugees' is not precisely accurate as during their time at the border most people have not yet claimed asylum or received refugee status in either the UK or France.

Secondly, we use this term as these are people who are forced to move, not afforded stability, often unhoused and unable to settle.

## LIMITATIONS TO OUR RESEARCH

### MISSING DATA

A lot of data which could have been central to this report is missing or was never collected. In some cases this is because the UK or French governments refuse to make information publicly available (for instance, regarding funding for border security). In other cases, it is the result of the state's failure to collect important data, such as overall numbers of deaths and disappearances, or complaints of violence. This kind of data collection is then left to overstretched NGOs working at the border, who attempt to compile vital information alongside providing day to day vital material support, and to journalists who are rarely well resourced to carry out this work. In both cases, the state should closely document this information and make sure it is publicly available. This must be done with a genuine commitment to transparency and ethical practices, and must also include past incidents where possible.

### BARRIERS TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

When starting this project, we knew it would be challenging to collect testimonies about violence at the border, particularly when working in a trauma-informed way. However, we were still surprised at how few people wished to share experiences of violence. This did not seem to correspond to the scale of violence which we, and other organisations, are regularly witnessing. We believe there are several reasons for this.

Firstly, we mainly spoke to people once they were already in the UK, as we thought people might feel more able to share once they had a level of distance from their experiences in northern France, rather than continuing to live them whilst stuck at the border. However, at this point some people did not wish to relive memories from their journey. Others were focused on practical issues, addressing the myriad of bureaucratic challenges and ongoing hostility and harm which face those in the UK asylum system, alongside ongoing separation from family and processing the impact of their journey.

Another issue was the normalisation of the violence people had experienced. For many people, violence in northern France occurred in the context of an incredibly difficult journey through a host of countries where they experienced much greater levels of violence. A lot of the people we spoke to had travelled through Libya and spent months and years in detention there facing extreme torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty; comparatively,

violence in northern France seemed negligible.<sup>2</sup> Other sites of violence such as the Balkans, the Belarus-Poland border, Morocco and Mediterranean crossings into Spain, were also mentioned, eclipsing people's perceptions of violence in France.<sup>3</sup>

The repetition of violence throughout people's journeys, including within France, can lead to people normalising violence against themselves. This is coupled with a lack of accountability from perpetrators of violence, meaning it can feel pointless to share experiences. Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, explains how this is particularly true for unaccompanied children (although it certainly affects all other groups at the border):

**"We have young people who will tell us, "It's normal, I have no right to be here, I'm illegal, people are just doing their job." There is a lot of trivialisation and internalisation of violence, which is really worrying. What's more, we're talking about young people, minors, teenagers who are still developing personally, for whom this is going to have a real impact on their psychological and mental development."**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

Despite all of this, we spoke to many people around the UK and in Calais who did wish to share their stories. Even people who were wary of discussing violence often wanted to discuss their time in Calais and reminisce about the people and places they encountered there. For many people it was a phase of life they didn't want to forget entirely, but rather one they wanted to bear witness to.

Those who did share their stories with us were not always able to share every detail, and some topics were too difficult to talk about.

Our aim in producing this report is to forefront the experiences of people who have spent time enduring inhuman conditions and violence at the UK-France border in their own words. It is impossible to do these experiences justice in such a brief report, but we hope we have handled these stories with the care and respect they deserve.

**Thank you to everyone who spoke to us. Thank you for your courage and selflessness in speaking out, and thank you for trusting us to do this work.**

# 2

## CONTEXTUALISING THE UK-FRANCE BORDER

### 2.a. HOW THE UK AND FRENCH GOVERNMENTS FUND AND INSTIGATE VIOLENCE

**“It’s a problem from the government on both sides.”**

- Mustafa, who we met in Calais in September 2025

#### BILATERAL FUNDING AGREEMENTS

This report centres around and emphasises the UK and French governments’ joint responsibility for violence at the UK-France border. Both governments organise and fund violent policing operations in the name of ‘security’. The political aim of these violent actions is to stop people reaching the UK: as such, they constitute an outsourcing and externalisation of UK border policy and act in the anti-migrant interests of the UK government. This section explores the UK and French governments’ joint responsibility for border policy.

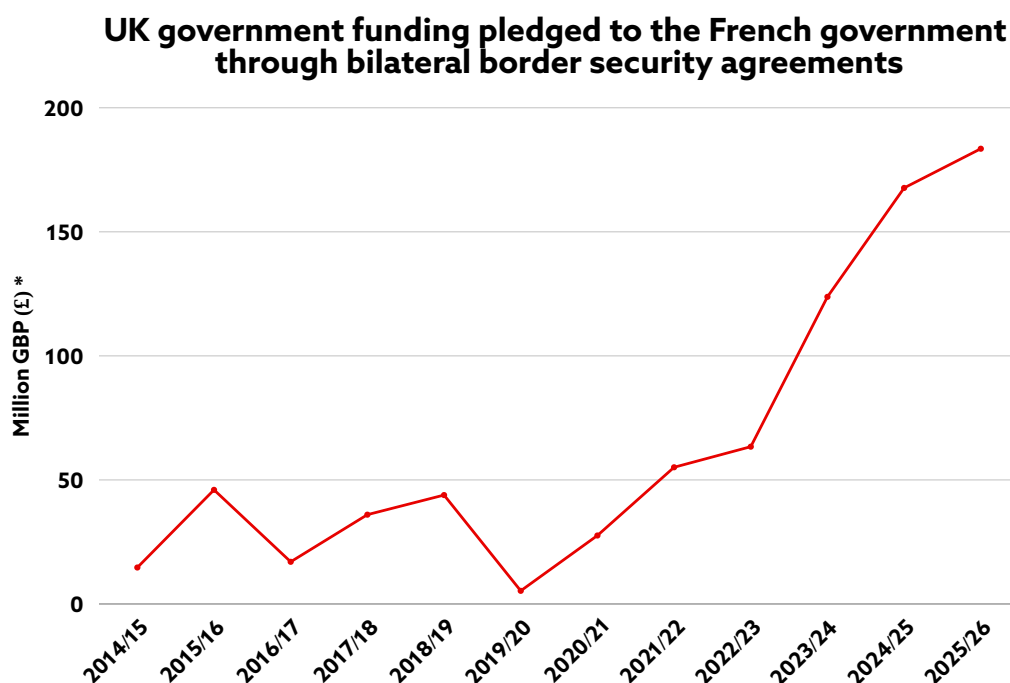
Since the 1991 Sangatte protocol, the French and UK governments have co-operated with each other to manage ‘security’ at the UK-France border. Of course, when the term ‘security’ is used, the question of who is being kept secure or safe is crucial - security is invoked as a concept to justify brutality against people on the move, people who are racialised as non-white and therefore seen as inherently dangerous, in order to keep white UK citizens ‘safe’. However, the security and safety of people on the move is not included within this context.

The pattern of securitisation of the UK-France border across the decades has been an attempt to stop ‘irregular’ migration by deterring people from the border. Actions taken to try and achieve this have always tended towards hostility, violence and attempts to make people disappear from the border. Not only have these been ineffective, as highlighted by the increasing numbers of people crossing the Channel year on year throughout this period; more importantly, they have had a horrifying human cost. As this report shows, securitisation does not mean keeping people safe; instead it kills, injures and traumatises people, disregarding any concerns for human rights or basic humanity.

The Le Touquet accords, signed in 2003, were the first bilateral agreement which primarily addressed the question of people on the move passing through northern France to reach the UK. They aimed to reduce the number of people crossing the Channel following the closure

of the Sangatte camp.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this, the accords formalised “juxtaposed border controls,” which mean UK border security takes place in France, and vice versa. This allowed UK security forces to operate in France, and the accords are widely credited with laying the foundations for decades of increasing securitisation of the border.<sup>5</sup> However, as people continued to come to the UK, the UK government was keen to further ramp up its involvement in border securitisation on French soil. As a result, in 2010, the Joint Declaration on Immigration was made, marking the first agreement to formalise joint policing and surveillance missions at the border.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, increasingly frequent bilateral agreements have funnelled a growing amount of UK funding to the French government for ‘security’ operations at the border, as shown in Figure 1. The 2018 Sandhurst Treaty has provided an ongoing legal framework for the continued renewal of this funding.<sup>7</sup> According to the agreements, this funding has been used for a large range of ‘security’ apparatus and personnel, from surveillance technologies such as drones, helicopters and other aircraft, to reservists and intelligence officers.<sup>8</sup> These resources enable the securitisation of the border through violent policing of people trying to cross the Channel, as this report shows.



**Figure 1:** UK funding of joint border securitisation work. (Source: House of Commons Library.<sup>9</sup>)

*\*In House of Commons Library data, 2018-2026 funding is listed in Euros. Here they have been converted into GBP (accurate exchange rate at time of writing) for ease of comparison.*

4 - The camp was closed due to concerns from the UK government that it was attracting more people on the move to come to the UK, showing that cross-border political pressure was being exerted even at this stage <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-37750368>  
 5, 6 - <https://freemovement.org.uk/twenty-years-of-franco-british-border-agreements/>  
 7, 8, 9 - <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9681/CBP-9681.pdf>

Information obtained by journalists from Politico shows in more detail how this money was spent between 2021 and 2023.<sup>10</sup> These documents show that UK money transferred under the Sandhurst Treaty has been used to buy a large range of equipment for French police forces in the North and Brittany regions of France.



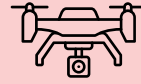
# 700

Hours of helicopter surveillance flights



# 150

Cars and vans for French police forces



# 11

Surveillance drones



Thermal imaging cameras

This equipment includes vast amounts of practical equipment such as uniforms, vehicles and accommodation for police officers. Between 2022 and 2023, UK money was used to fund equipment including: 700 hours of helicopter surveillance flights, over 150 cars and vans for French police forces, and at least 11 drones and multiple thermal imaging cameras to spot people waiting to cross the Channel.

The UK government providing the French police with these resources enables them to drive to beaches and living sites and carry out the violence exposed in this report. In March 2025, the BBC quoted then-French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau, writing that “the French have 1,200 security personnel deployable daily on coastal smuggler operations.<sup>11</sup> Some 730 of them are paid for by the British”.

**This means that when these police officers stationed at the border commit violence against people on the move, they are more likely than not funded by the UK government.**

Critically, in March 2023, under the Joint Leaders Declaration, **a further £476 million pounds was pledged by the UK to France at a time of increased deaths and violent incidents.** In 2024, the year following this massive investment, at least 65 people died within 300 metres of the French coast, strongly suggesting a correlation between increased investments in border securitisation and border deaths.<sup>12</sup>

# £476m

Pledged by the UK to France for border securitisation, March 2023

Each year large sums of money have also been spent on aerial surveillance, such as paying for hours of surveillance flights and training new pilots.<sup>13</sup> The increased surveillance of the border zone, alongside heightened capacity for police patrols of the beaches, has been a significant factor in the rise of violence experienced by people on the move in the last few years.<sup>14</sup>

10 - <https://www.politico.eu/article/helicopters-riding-boats-and-vacuum-cleaners-how-french-border-force-spends-uk-money/>

11 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c39vjnpxy1wo>

12 - <https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/01/28/the-deadly-consequences-of-the-new-deal-to-stop-the-boats/>

13 - <https://www.politico.eu/article/helicopters-riding-boats-and-vacuum-cleaners-how-french-border-force-spends-uk-money/>

14 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj9j8r8z90wo>

Surveillance is often increased in the name of increasing search and rescue capacity, yet it is clearly not being used for this effectively, as shown by the increase in deaths in recent years. Instead, it enables violent police operations by informing the police with increasing accuracy of the presence of people attempting to cross the Channel, and is used to criminalise people once they arrive in the UK as an attempted deterrent for crossing.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the increase in surveillance technology means the UK government is more aware of the levels of violence occurring on beaches surrounding crossing attempts. However, rather than attempting to limit this violence, the UK has continued to increase funding for the French police and surveillance equipment, without introducing any kind of monitoring which would evaluate the impact of this funding.

## LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

As illuminating as the records obtained by Politico are in breaking down the exact use of UK government funding by the French government, the most recent funding block they detail is 2021-2023. In writing this report, we sought to obtain the corresponding documents for 2023-2025, as we believe it is crucial for understanding how UK policy and funding cause violence.

However, both the UK and French authorities have refused to provide this data at the time of writing. **The UK government has refused Freedom of Information requests by saying that if the records were published, they would damage relations with France.** The French government has not provided a reason for their refusal. This raises crucial questions about what the money is being spent on, and why this is being obscured.

**We believe this funding is contributing to violence and human rights abuses, and as such it is vital - and indeed in the public interest - that it is made public.**

### RECOMMENDATION

#### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **publish all contracts, financial data and monitoring processes related to spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies. This must include detailed accounts of how money is spent and how the impact of spending is monitored by the UK government.
- The UK and French governments must **release all policy, practice and operation documents that relate to securitisation of the border**.

This report explores this causal relationship in more detail. It is clear that UK funding of securitising operations enables and extends the violence experienced by people on the move, in the name of 'greater security'.



**“The trend we see is that the more money that is put into the border, the worse the situation becomes. People don’t always see the link between violence at the border and funding, but we know that as funding increases, the issues women face increase. For example, when the BMX camp [of about 200 people] was cleared out, we were told that it was all British money that was used.”**

*- Joseph Givens, coordinator at Maria Skobtsova House*

**“We saw increased violence appear in early 2023, shortly after the £72 million agreements. In fact, there were UK- France agreements that were signed in November 2022, and then from the beginning of 2023, we started to see violence on the beaches, so the police took direct action against people who were going to take boats. That's when we started to see tear gas, boats being set on fire,<sup>16</sup> people being chased along the beach, and that increased steadily in 2023, with a reaffirmation after the Franco-British summit in March 2023 or thereabouts, where the agreements were renegotiated...**

**I think it's up to 143 million euros that has been reinvested in the border, which has led to a real systematisation of police action on the beaches. This has been correlated with an increase in the number of deaths near the coast or in boats, it's what we have seen. This accelerated between the end of 2023 and throughout 2024, when we saw a dramatic increase in deaths.”**

*- Flore Judet, L'Auberge des Migrants*



Once again, the Labour government has continued in the vein of what has gone before. In February 2025, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announced a new agreement with France including €8,276,500 for specialist intelligence officers, further deployed reservists, and a new ‘Compagnie de Marche’.<sup>17</sup> This new operation was supposed to involve police intervening once boats were already in the water, which is currently not allowed under French laws.

Nonetheless, as this report shows, this rule against intervening once boats are in the water is not actually followed by police on the ground, demonstrating that official policy often fails to reflect violent operational tactics. Of course, the UK and French authorities are not ignorant of the fact that police often use violence, including in the water: their surveillance capabilities mean they are able to observe these operations closely, yet they do not take action to bring these actions in line with official policies.

16 - [https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/calais-la-police-a-t-elle-mis-le-feu-a-une-embarcation-de-migrants-20240411\\_33WSUFDXC5DI7JINESWKBLPSTE/](https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/calais-la-police-a-t-elle-mis-le-feu-a-une-embarcation-de-migrants-20240411_33WSUFDXC5DI7JINESWKBLPSTE/)

17 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-uk-french-action-to-go-after-smuggler-gangs>

In 2025, Cooper claimed that she had ‘persuaded’ France to intervene up to 300m into the water.<sup>18</sup> This is not only a dangerous approach likely to lead to further police violence against people trying to cross; it also shows the sway the UK holds over French policy and police operations at the border. However, in this specific instance, UK influence has met some barriers, as French policing bodies have been reluctant to introduce the new policy for fear of potential dangerous repercussions.<sup>19</sup>

At the time of writing, the policy still has not been changed, but the UK government continues to champion the importance of allowing these dangerous interventions.<sup>20</sup> (For more details on the danger posed by intervening in shallow waters, see [section 5c.](#))

## RECOMMENDATION

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The UK and French governments must **commit to not implementing violent police actions which will endanger life**, such as pullbacks or interventions in the water.

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **create a monitoring framework based in international human rights law** to ensure any future policy and spending on border security does not contravene human rights.

## OTHER UK FUNDING

The UK government also co-ordinates with and funds other partners to continue its policy of securitising the border. In 2024, the UK also reached a working arrangement with Frontex to ensure co-operation on ‘illegal’ migration and ‘cross-border crime’, focusing largely on intelligence sharing and shared training alongside collaboration on research.<sup>21</sup>

The UK has also been paying private companies to carry out the violent ‘securitisation’ of the border for years.<sup>22</sup>

**In 2025, researchers found evidence of £3.5 billion worth of contracts between the UK government and businesses working on border security, such as Elbit and BAE systems.**<sup>23</sup>

However, they estimate that the true figure is much higher, due to the obscurity of many contracts which the government refuses to publish even following Freedom of Information requests. As with the UK to French government payments, this raises the question of what the UK government is paying for without letting the public know, and why it needs to be kept a secret.

18 - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/small-boat-migrants-yvette-cooper-today-b2741349.html>

19, 20 - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/oct/16/uk-border-chief-frustrated-at-french-failure-to-curb-small-boat-crossings>

21 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-frontex-working-arrangement>

22 - <https://corporatewatch.org/calaisresearch-40-companies-profiting-from-the-eviction-and-border-violence/>

23 - <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/exclusive-government-hands-private-firms-3bn-in-bid-to-stop-the-boats/>

Ironically, whilst government rhetoric often points to smuggling operations as profiting from the crisis at the border, the real profiteers are these private companies, several of whose individual contracts are worth more than the estimated worth of an entire year of the smuggling industry.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, surveillance technologies were heavily invested in; the largest contract was with aerospace firm Tekever who were paid £1 billion between 2020 and 2022 to provide aerial surveillance of the Channel.<sup>25</sup> These technologies once again contribute to the criminalisation and violence used against people attempting to cross the Channel; once again, UK policy and spending causes human rights abuses. The difference here is that shareholders are making a profit from this violence.

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **publish all contracts, financial data and monitoring processes related to spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies. This must include detailed accounts of how money is spent and how the impact of spending is monitored by the UK government.

## FRENCH FUNDING: SECURITISATION OVER PROTECTION

The French government also finances a large percentage of the operations at the border. In 2021, a French parliamentary inquiry found that the **total annual spending on police for the border totaled 178 million euros** - 86 million euros for mobile units of police such as Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS - French riot police) and Gendarmes (the French military police force), and the remaining 96 million for permanently stationed units such as the Police Aux Frontières (PAF - French border police). *It is worth noting here that a range of French police forces are used in the securitisation of the border, at times interchangeably and at times with specific roles.*<sup>26</sup>

The inquiry also found that between 2017 and 2021, the French government spent 425 million euros on the so-called “bunkerisation” of the border - this included surveillance technologies, private security contracts for the ports, walls and other security material. Much of this went to private companies, such as Eurotunnel or Thales.

**Comparing the costs to the amount spent by the French government on aid, shelter and other support services for people on the move in the Calais area, the inquiry found that the split was 85% of funding on repression, 15% on welcome policies.**<sup>27</sup>

24, 25 - For more information, see Section 5 of Channel Crossings Final Report <https://channelcrossings.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/channel-crossings-report-3.pdf>

26 - For more information see <https://humanrightsobservers.org/reports/>

27 - <https://basta.media/controle-aux-frontieres-migrants-exiles-Calais-Briancon-couts-de-la-repression-bunkerisation-militarisation-Darmanin#nb2>

The French government has made a clear choice to focus on treating people with violence and creating abhorrent living conditions for them, rather than attempting to support them and facilitate access to their basic human rights.

**“Furthermore, listening to the speeches, British funding represents one-third of the total funding for the border each year, so we can imagine that more than €500 million per year is invested in this border and, according to Retailleau, €20 million in welcoming people. So we are talking about total aberrations with the development of security techniques that cost a fortune in terms of mobilising the gendarmerie, the CRS and the police.”**

*- Flore Judet, L'Auberge des Migrants*

However, since then the amounts involved in French spending at the border have remained opaque, whether on state operations like policing, or in funding to private companies. In September 2024, a group of French députés submitted a request to pursue an inquiry into the funding and operations of anti-migrant policies at the UK-France border by the French and UK governments. One of the aims of this inquiry is to establish the amount of money spent on the ‘no points of fixation’ policy (see [section 4b.](#)), as well as the amount spent on surveillance and life-saving missions.<sup>28</sup>

### RECOMMENDATION

#### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK parliament’s Home Affairs Select Committee or Public Accounts Committee must **conduct an inquiry into UK spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies, to establish how taxpayer’s money has been used.

Therefore the fact that both the UK and French governments are spending huge sums of money to securitise the border, whilst failing to invest in the reception of people on the move, shows that the priority for both governments is policing over welcoming. This trend, which has continued for decades, has devastating consequences for people who attempt to cross the border. The rest of this report will analyse the violence people are facing as a result of this securitisation policy.

## 2.b. WHY DO PEOPLE CROSS TO THE UK?

**“Most of the time, people are coming from their homeland because of a difficult situation...sometimes political instability, natural disaster, or war, something like that...so we don't have any kind of choice.”**

*- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025*

Given the high levels of risk and violence associated with crossing from France to the UK, the question of why people are coming to the UK is often asked. Of course, each individual's reasons for wanting to reach the UK are unique and varied. However, key factors often include cultural and family ties to the UK, language, colonial histories and knowledge of culture, as well as the fact that many people cannot stay in the EU.

Total lack of access to safe routes to reach the UK mean people are left without a choice but to cross the Channel in dangerous, irregular ways.

## REASONS TO COME TO THE UK

**“I want to come to England because I speak English. Lots of Sudanese people want to come to England because of the historic colonial links between England and Sudan.”**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

Language, cultural and community ties often constitute key reasons why people wish to travel to the UK. Many people, including unaccompanied children, who are crossing have family in the UK. Others may not have family but have other community links in the UK, such as friends or established diaspora communities. Research from Refugee Action shows that:

**“Nearly seven in ten asylum seekers to the UK in the past 23 years have come from countries where the UK has an extensive history of extraction and violence”, usually directly through colonial rule but also including through political interventions and economic exploitation.<sup>29</sup>**

29 - <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Asylum-In-The-UK-A-Front-Line-For-Racial-Justice-Briefing.pdf>

As Refugee Action explain:

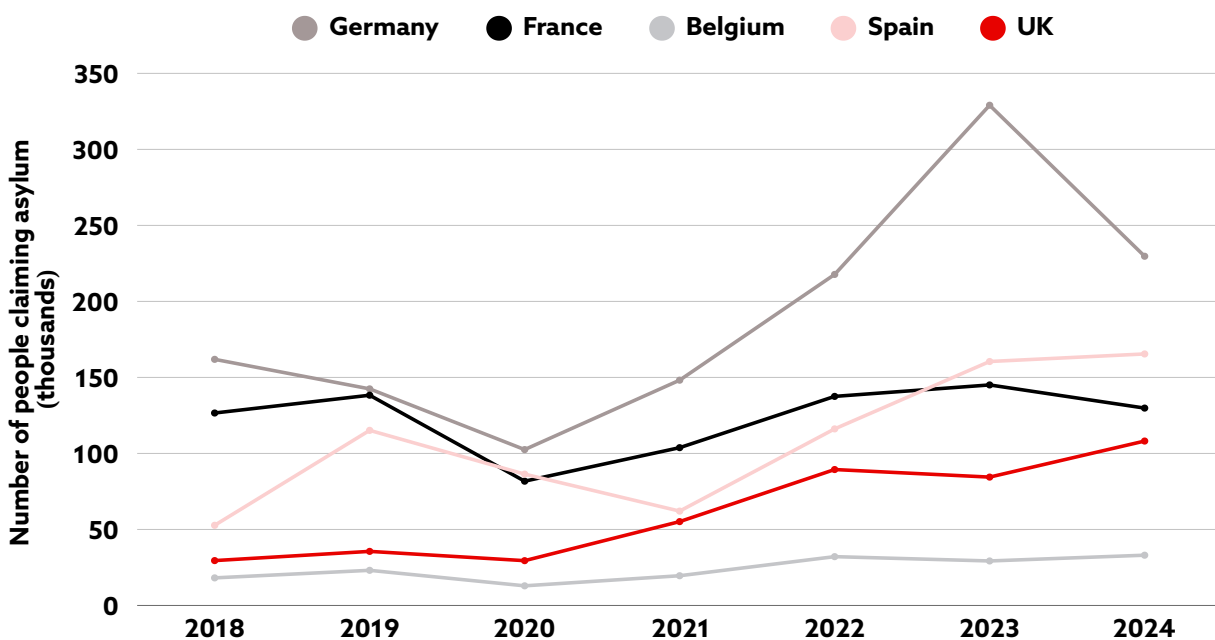
**“Countries of origin are not simply emitting people to the UK. The volatility, repression and violence these countries experience have not come about in a vacuum, and most have histories in which Britain was intimately involved”.<sup>30</sup>**

- Refugee Action

The legacy of colonialism and intervention are not only factors in the conditions of displacement, but mean some people are more likely to come to the UK due to large diaspora communities, language ties, and knowledge of the UK from education systems which are still shaped by UK colonial influence.

However, despite common misconception, the UK does not receive a disproportionate number of asylum applications compared to other European countries.

### Asylum Applications to the UK and selected EU countries, 2018-2024



**Figure 2:** Asylum Applications in the UK and selected EU countries 2018-2024  
(sources: UK Home Office statistics, EUROSTAT)

## REASONS TO LEAVE EUROPE

People also end up coming to the UK because they have attempted to seek sanctuary in Europe and have been unable to, for a variety of reasons.

France itself is a dangerous and precarious country for many people, meaning they are understandably reluctant to stay. Levels of homelessness are high among people seeking asylum, and violent policing adds to the lack of basic services to create a hostile reception for those seeking safety.

In addition to this, there are barriers to applying for asylum, particularly for people who are already in Calais and Dunkirk. A lack of information on how to apply for asylum in France, coupled with having to travel to Arras or Lille for asylum appointments, means many people struggle to apply for asylum in France even when they want to.

Abel, who spent April and May 2025 in Dunkirk before crossing to the UK, explains some of the reasons he couldn't stay in France:

**"I had already asked the French government to seek asylum there, but they didn't respond to their phone. They would say things like, come again in a month. If you approached the police in the street and explained that you wanted to seek asylum, 'I want to give my details to the government,' they would say, 'right now I can't, take this number and call them'. And I was afraid of them.**

**And if you choose to stay in France, most immigrants have to live in the street. It's not good for an immigrant. Maybe it will take two years, five years, six years for your case to be seen. Because of this, people don't want to stay in France. And also the police are very dangerous... People always need to pass from France to the UK. If you just close that system, there will be a mess... for example you lose life. As human beings, we don't have any borders. It's a human right for everyone to have the ability to move from one place to another place. Every immigrant wants to live in a place where they can have a good situation, where they choose."**

*- Abel, who spent April and May 2025 in Dunkirk before crossing to the UK*

However, France is not the only European country people are having to leave. People have often waited many years for the resolution of their claims for asylum or other forms of protection elsewhere in Europe, or even had claims for asylum rejected. This means they are living in limbo, irregularly, when they want stability.

**"I spent four years in Germany and I had claimed asylum there, but they refused my application three times and deported me. That's why I came to France. If I go back to Germany they will return me to my home country, and I have problems there so I can't go back. I spent four years unable to work, without documents, and I couldn't build a life there. Now I can either return or look for another European country"**

- Mustafa, who we met in Calais in 2025

The Dublin III Regulation is a European Union mechanism which helps identify which country is responsible for processing the asylum application of someone belonging to a non-EU country or a stateless person.<sup>31</sup> It states that a person must seek asylum in their first country of arrival to Europe. This however also means that southern European countries are overburdened with requests, and that their reception systems are often oversaturated, leading to lengthy waiting times and poor living conditions that in some cases lead people on the move to want to travel onwards.

However, the Dublin III Regulation means it can be impossible to seek asylum in one European country after having had one's fingerprints taken in another, or having had one's asylum application rejected: once someone's asylum claim is refused in a country that participates in the Regulation, this refusal is in theory upheld across all participating countries.<sup>32</sup> Salim, a Sudanese man we met in Calais hospital after he experienced a road accident in 2024 explained:

**"I came here because the Dutch government stopped processing asylum applications from Sudanese people..."**

Indeed in 2023, the Dutch government declared an indefinite pause in asylum processing for Sudanese nationals,<sup>33</sup> leaving them in limbo. Despite having a brother settled as a refugee in France, Salim thought it would be best to travel on to the UK. He explained:

**"...if I asked in France they would send me back to the Netherlands, because I gave my fingerprints [asked for asylum] there."**

- Salim, who we met in Calais in August 2024

31 - For more information, see <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/moving-country/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/the-asylum-process-in-ireland/dublin-convention/>

32 - <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/39545/eu-when-an-asylum-claim-is-inadmissible#:~:text=If%20you%20arrive%20in%20Italy,authorities%20in%20these%20two%20scenarios.>

This emphasises the extent to which people on the move are subject to the whims of the shifting policies and political moods of European states, especially at a time when political goodwill towards asylum seekers is plummeting. Asylum seekers thus experience the European Union as a dire game of ‘snakes and ladders,’ in which their control over their mobility is heavily restricted. People lose all control over which European country they want to live in. As Samir explains,

**“My brother has been here [in France] since April, but after 3 months the prefecture told him the Italians want him, and that he has to go to Italy. They told him he’s not allowed to go to the UK.”**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

Since Brexit however, if either Salim or Samir’s brother did go to the UK, they would be unable to return them to the Netherlands and Italy respectively, unlike the French authorities. The Dublin III Regulation thus influences people’s decision to travel to the UK - and even incentivises it - because the UK is no longer a participant in the Regulation since withdrawing from the European Union in early 2021, and cannot return people to Europe.

Women, children and families are just as impacted by hostile migration policies in Europe. Project Play documents the numbers of families in 2024 who had spent significant amounts of time in European countries, including many children who were born in Europe.<sup>34</sup> A volunteer at Maria Skobtsova House describes a striking example of this kind of situation:

**“One woman tried to cross the Channel a couple of times. She had lived in Sweden for 12 years and her 7 year old son was born there. She was denied the renewal of her working visa. Her immigration lawyer told her she could either marry someone Swedish immediately or leave the country. She applied for the new ‘one in, one out’ scheme but was refused because her son was born in Sweden. So they tried to cross to the UK 3 times. On the third time the boat’s motor stopped 2 hours into the journey, and they had to be brought back by search and rescue. Her son was really enthusiastic to go to the UK, and would draw pictures of boat crossings with a rainbow where the UK is.”**

*- Volunteer, Maria Skobtsova House*

Lily MacTaggart from Humans for Rights Network explained:<sup>35</sup>

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33 - <https://ind.nl/nl/nieuws/tijdelijke-stop-op-besluiten-voor-asielzoekers-uit-sudan>

34, 35 - [https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156\\_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23fbe5d77d.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23fbe5d77d.pdf)

**“Many of the families I worked with in Calais and Dunkirk had left Germany or other EU countries after years of living there. After being refused, there was no hope of successfully applying for asylum in France or another EU country. The UK seemed like the only option.”**

- Lily MacTaggart, Humans for Rights Network

The stuckness these families experience emphasises their exclusion from protection and basic citizenship rights in European countries, explain why many people feel they have no other choice but to take unnecessary risks to cross an increasingly lethal border. Ahmed Al-Hashimi, whose 7 year old daughter Sara died during a crossing attempt in April 2024, explained:

**“I've spent 14 years in Europe and have been rejected... If I knew there was a 1% chance that I could keep the kids in Belgium or France or Sweden or Finland I would keep them there.”**

- Ahmed Al-Hashimi

Another key factor in determining people's onward journey through Europe in search of protection is the impact of extreme violence and other forms of inhuman and degrading treatment in states throughout Europe, including Belarus, Poland, Bulgaria or Croatia (but not limited to). Police brutality, violent border pushbacks, witnessing death and serious injury and denied access to asylum procedures, all are significant factors informing a rational decision a person may make to continue their journey across Europe to find a place of safety.<sup>36</sup>

These cases show not only the instability and uprooting of lives that results from hostile European migration policies, but also the inaccessibility of the few available safe routes to travel to the UK. It sheds light on one aspect of why people take unimaginable risks to cross the border to the UK, unable, for a wide range of reasons, to build a life for themselves in the European Union.

## A LACK OF ACCESSIBLE SAFE ROUTES

For decades, many people who wish to seek safety in the UK have had no safe route sanctioned by the government to do so. This is in stark contrast with schemes which have provided safe routes to some in this time, such as the Ukrainian scheme which, although flawed in other aspects, meant that only 7 Ukrainians have been known to cross the Channel in small boats.<sup>37</sup>

### 2025 - THE CLOSURE OF EXISTING SAFE ROUTES

Throughout 2025, the UK government has made a series of decisions which have further narrowed people's access to safe routes.

36 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/10/poland-brutal-pushbacks-belarus-border>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/21/landmark-ruling-greek-border-pushbacks>

37 - <https://freemovement.org.uk/what-safe-and-legal-routes-are-available-for-refugees-to-come-to-the-united-kingdom/>

**On 1st July 2025, the government announced the closure of the ARAP scheme for Afghan nationals with just a few hours' notice.<sup>38</sup>**

**On 4th September 2025, refugee family reunion routes were suspended indefinitely, after just a couple of days notice.<sup>39</sup>**

This has devastating impacts on those wishing to be reunited with their loved ones.<sup>40</sup> Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova safe house coordinator, described one family impacted by this development:

**“One woman currently staying in our house with her 2 year old daughter was trying to cross with the rest of their family - her husband and two young sons. However, they were having no success, so the father and sons attempted it successfully without her and their daughter. They hoped that afterwards, she and her daughter would be able to reach them safely, potentially through family reunion. But now the family is separated and the family reunion route is closed. She has tried to cross the Channel over 30 times, she said that after 20 she gave up counting.”**

*- Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova House*

Even before the family reunion routes were closed, they were rarely used to reunite people who were in France with family in the UK. Instead, they were more often used to reunite family members who had been left behind in dangerous situations in countries of origin or neighbouring countries.

Without this option available to people, their families will have to make the difficult journey to the UK themselves, ultimately having to cross the Channel. This will disproportionately affect women and children, as of the family reunion visas granted in the year ending June 2025, 92% were given to women and children – more than half to children.<sup>41</sup> The Helen Bamber Foundation's recent report explores the life-threatening impact this has on refugees, from those in the UK waiting to be reunited with their families to those hoping to reach the UK who remain in danger.

**“The harm my family has suffered is both physical and psychological... I live in constant anguish knowing they face daily threats and extreme hardship. The emotional toll on me has been enormous: my mental health has deteriorated, I suffer from severe anxiety and depression, and I now have high blood pressure caused by ongoing stress and worry for my family's safety.”**

*- An Ambassador for Change from the Helen Bamber Foundation<sup>42</sup>*

38 - <https://righttoremain.org.uk/closure-of-safe-routes-for-afghans-changes-to-the-immigration-rules/>

39 - <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/qa-the-uks-new-approach-to-refugee-family-reunion/>

40 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c62ljg1xj1vo>

41, 42 - [helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/HBF%20refugee%20family%20reunion%20briefing\\_Final\\_Oct25.pdf](https://helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/HBF%20refugee%20family%20reunion%20briefing_Final_Oct25.pdf)

Research by the Red Cross shows that people already feel pushed by lengthy and ineffective family reunion procedures to take dangerous journeys, such as small boat crossings, to try and reunite with family in the UK.<sup>43</sup> This will only increase with the suspension of family reunion routes.

## 'ONE IN, ONE OUT' - FAR FROM SAFE

The UK government claims to have introduced a safe route in 2025, suggesting a supposed hope for those in France waiting to cross the border. Under the 'one in, one out' scheme, people can apply to come to the UK from France to seek asylum. At first glance, this seems a promising development. However, on closer inspection the cruel and paradoxical nature of this so-called 'safe route' becomes clear. The UK government will only take one person for each person who is deported back to France after crossing irregularly.

This means that if no-one makes the dangerous crossing to the UK in small boats, no-one will be accepted from France. **One person's safety depends on another's risk to life.** Furthermore, the scheme is far from accessible to many of those who need it, due to stringent ID requirements, an opaque application system without an appeals process, and the exclusion of unaccompanied children from applying. Samir was rejected from the scheme after being told, incorrectly, that his location was outside of France when he confirmed it by phone call. He explained:

**"I just want to come legally, but now my only choice is trucks, trucks or the sea."**

- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025

In the absence of safe routes to reach the UK, people are left with no choice but to make dangerous crossings. As they approach the Channel and seek to survive at the border whilst they wait to cross, their lives are characterised by violence that unsuccessfully aims to deter them.

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.



## SECTION 2: SUMMARY

### CONTEXTUALISING THE UK-FRANCE BORDER

Section 2 has demonstrated how the UK and France are jointly responsible for organising and financing securitisation of the border. It also examines how colonial histories, cultural ties, family links and flawed migration policies across Europe are contributing factors in people's decisions to come to the UK.

#### KEY FINDINGS

- Through bilateral agreements, the UK and France are jointly responsible for policy and funding of the border, both through state and private sector operations.
- UK funding equips police officers and buys surveillance equipment. Over half of law enforcement at the border are paid by UK funding.
- The exact use of UK funding is kept hidden by both the French and UK government.
- French government spending focuses on violent policing (85%) rather than reception of people at the border (15%).
- People have a variety of reasons to come to the UK, including cultural and historical colonial ties, family links, and being unable to stay in Europe.
- 2025 has seen the closure of several safe routes to the UK, including refugee family reunion, which were already insufficient to meet demand but provided much needed support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

#### LIMITING HARM

- The UK and French governments must **commit to not implementing violent police actions which will endanger life**, such as pullbacks or interventions in the water.

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

#### FUNDING AND POLICY

- The UK parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee or Public Accounts Committee must **conduct an inquiry into UK spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies, to establish how taxpayer's money has been used.
- The UK and French governments must **publish all contracts, financial data and monitoring processes related to spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies. This must include detailed accounts of how money is spent and how the impact of spending is monitored by the UK government.
- The UK and French governments must **release all policy, practice and operation documents that relate to securitisation of the border**.
- The UK and French governments must **create a monitoring framework based in international human rights law** to ensure any future policy and spending on border security does not contravene human rights.

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

#### ACCESS TO ASYLUM

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

# 3

# VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

**“There are always a lot of police at the central station to catch people - on the train and the bus. They come looking and then they take people. They are there morning, night, afternoon - all the time. They ask for your ID and they gave me a paper to leave France. I had to run away from them to escape.”**

*- Yousef, an Egyptian man who we met in Calais in September 2025*

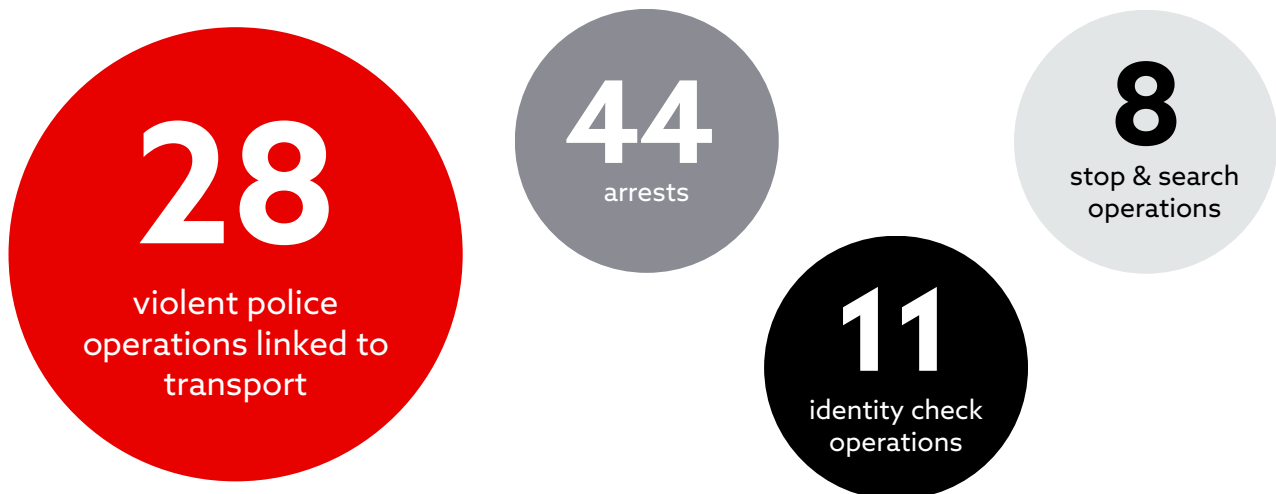
As the French and UK governments have increased securitisation of the border, they endeavour to disrupt people's journeys earlier and earlier in the timeline of a crossing attempt. As a result, transport networks within Calais and Dunkirk, and France more generally, have become the sites of higher levels of violent policing in recent years, during which people are racially profiled and targeted, believed to be trying to cross the Channel. This adds difficulty and danger to people's journeys as well as disrupting people's access to asylum services in France.

Attempts to stop people crossing the UK-France border start even before people arrive in the north of France, with attempts by the French authorities to stop people taking public transport in Paris. Flore Judet from L'Auberge des Migrants explains:

**“[the French interior ministry organised] literally a raid at train stations to prevent people from travelling to northern France. There was a circular issued in Paris, which was specifically targeted at access to northern France. So there is a real desire to prevent people from crossing and at the same time to do everything possible to prevent them from settling here. So we are in a kind of very absurd situation, and all this is in response to pressure from the British government, first through Le Touquet, the Le Touquet agreements, and then through Sandhurst, which is in fact just a validation of part of the Le Touquet agreements, which says, 'OK, we're going to fund the police, we're going to fund the violence that is being perpetrated against people on the move.'”**

*- Flore Judet, L'Auberge des Migrants*

In 2024 and 2025, policing of transport networks in Calais, Dunkirk and the surrounding areas has greatly increased.<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Observers (HRO) have extensively recorded and documented the impacts of this high police presence on people on the move. In 2024, HRO recorded 28 violent police operations linked to transport. This included at least 44 arrests, 8 stop and search operations and 11 identity check operations. HRO also describes the fact that many of these operations clearly racially profiled people and only targeted people of colour.<sup>45</sup>



*HRO - Statistics from 2024*

This means people are often exposed to police violence from the moment they arrive in the north of France, and as they try to move around the region. Notably, this includes attempting to reach Arras and Lille for asylum appointments, meaning people often struggle to attend their appointments and are dissuaded from applying for asylum in France in the first place after seeing others struggle to apply.<sup>46</sup>

Targeting transport networks allows police to arrest people randomly, part of their policy of creating a hostile atmosphere for people on the move. Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025, explains:

**“When we try to get the train, or even when we go near to the train station, police can take you [for] 24 hours. The first time I arrived in Calais from Paris, I was trying to leave the station. They asked me if I had a paper from the prefecture - the one you have to give your fingerprints for - and I didn’t so they took me to the police station. They brought a translator and said it’s a regular thing, and a normal procedure, to stay there for 24 hours. They gave me papers to sign and didn’t explain what they were. I found out afterwards that the papers said I agreed to leave France after a month or apply for asylum.”**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

44 - <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rapport-Annuel-2024-FR.pdf>

45 - <https://humanrightsobservers.org/monthly-observations/>; see also p.37 *ibid*.

46 - [https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156\\_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23f5e5d77d.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23f5e5d77d.pdf)

Railway security staff are also involved in violent policing of trains. HRO recorded the following case study in 2024, one of 28 violent police operations they documented that year.

## CASE STUDY - VIOLENCE ON TRAINS

**23RD APRIL 2024**

**17:28**

The HRO team was warned about police presence, including police with dogs forcing people to leave trains, at Fontinettes station in south Calais.

**17:54**

On the way to the station, HRO met at least 60 people walking several metres from the station with safety vests in their hands. They were mostly Arabic speakers with some people from the Vietnamese community. HRO stopped to speak to them. According to the people on the move, the police made them get off the train using force. The dog was used to scare people and force them to leave the place. They told HRO that they were going to Calais to take a bus towards Dunkirk and that some people were still at Fontinettes station.

**17:55**

The HRO team arrived at Fontinettes station. In front of the station, 4 agents of railway security were present with a dog. The police were not present, and there were no people on the move present, but 3 volunteers from Utopia 56. These volunteers informed HRO about the operation which had just taken place: the security staff had carried out an eviction of the train just before. Around 60 people on the move were forced to leave the station by force, including the threat of the dog and the threat of the use of tear gas.

**18:08**

HRO went back to the centre of Calais and found around 60 people on the move going towards the bus station, hoping to take the bus towards Gravelines.

**18:16**

4 police officers from the Police Nationale and 2 employees of the Calais transport agency were present at the entrance to the bus. The police officers said to the transport workers "we will block all departures, reinforcements are coming". They signalled to the bus driver to leave, but some people on the move had succeeded in boarding.

**18:26**

The rest of the people on the move went towards Calais central train station to take a train to Dunkirk. Railway security and other employees were present with a dog on the platform. One member of staff said to the dog “don’t worry, you’ll get them all”, referring to the people on the move. These staff members asked HRO to leave. One person on the move came towards the security staff and they took the dog off its leash, holding it just by the collar, to threaten the person.

**18:42**

Some people on the move had managed to get on the train. Then 4 members of staff blocked one door of the train and 2 others climbed on board and let the dog off the lead to make the people on the move get off the train. The people on the train started to shout, blocked in the train corridor. They asked the security agents to stop because there were families and babies.

**18:49**

At least 6 officers from the Police Nationale arrived on the platform and 4 of them entered the train. One held a tear gas canister in their hand and shouted at people to go in French and English. Some people left the train and the police officer continued to threaten people, lifting their hand with the tear gas higher and shouting “Outside OK?” People continued to leave the train and explained to HRO that the police had hit them on their heads and arms. People on the move shouted “racists” at the police.

**18:53**

After everyone had left the train, the police officers and railway security pushed everyone towards the station exit. One police officer shouted violently as they pushed people. This pushing created an anxiety inducing atmosphere, with people moving in a crowd and shouting and the dog barking. The movement of the crowd was dangerous. When everyone was out of the station the police walked alongside the people on the move to ensure they had no possibility of returning to the station.

**18:54**

The people who had been thrown out of the train went to take the bus to Dunkirk, but it never arrived.

**19:55**

People returned to the train station and waited for a bus which was eventually cancelled. Several police officers were present and made racist jokes as people on the move passed, such as “this train is like the Titanic”. The police began to clear the station, saying it was closed. As people were leaving, the Police Aux Frontieres made 4 arrests.

As this case study shows, the violence experienced by people on the move within transport infrastructure in Calais and Dunkirk is not just random. Instead it is a key part of the strategy, carried out by the French police who are funded by the UK government, to prevent as many people as possible from reaching the beaches where they could then attempt to cross by small boat. This is UK border policy in action: vain attempts to deter people by introducing racialised violence into earlier and earlier aspects of their journey.

In February 2025, a deliberate policy of greater police presence within the bus network around Calais was introduced, as a further measure to try and stop people reaching crossing points.<sup>47</sup> The rest of 2025 has seen a high police presence at bus stops as well as police cars following buses with people on the move in them. The policing of buses is inherently based on racial profiling, as HRO team members explain:

**“And we've seen several times in Calais, at least, that the police make white people get on the bus - well, people perceived as white - before people perceived as people on the move. And what we found out was that once, it was a bus driver who said it was because there were eight seats for locals and the rest for people on the move. And the other day, two colleagues saw English tourists get on first. So it's not a question of locals, you see.”**

*- Volunteers, HRO*

This violent strategy succeeds in making it more difficult for people to cross by boat. However, rather than stopping people crossing and keeping them safe, it just introduces another experience of violence into their journey.

Furthermore, as the ‘traditional’ areas to cross from have been increasingly policed, both in transport networks and on the beaches, people have sought to leave from further and further afield. This makes crossing even more dangerous as the journey is much longer to reach the UK from other parts of the coast than it is from Calais or Dunkirk. A volunteer at Maria Skobtsova house explains:

**“At the moment [September 2025] everyone is getting thrown out of the buses to Dunkirk. People are crossing from more and more dangerous places, for example crossing from Boulogne where the journey to the UK is 3 times longer than if you go from Calais.”**

*- Volunteer, Maria Skobtsova House*

**RECOMMENDATION**

**BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE**

- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.

As people are harassed in all forms of public transport by French police, it is clear that they are not welcome in France. At the same time, this is all done in order to prevent people from leaving France by crossing the Channel. People are left with nowhere to go. Section 4 will demonstrate how this policy of making sure people are not welcome in France extends to the living conditions for people on the move in northern France, which are characterised by a lack of shelter and sanitation and ongoing police violence.

# SECTION 3: SUMMARY

## VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Section 3 has shown how transport networks have become a key site of state violence against people on the move in recent years.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### INCREASED POLICING

- In attempting to deter people from crossing, French police have begun to include transport networks as targets in their operations, using racial profiling.
- The increased policing of transport networks puts people at risk of racial harassment, stop and search, threat of violence and arrest.
- Police threaten people with tear gas, unleashing police dogs and shouting within trains and other transport links.

#### IMPACT ON ASYLUM APPLICATIONS

- High police presence in transport networks impedes people's asylum applications within France.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

##### ENDING STATE VIOLENCE

- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.



Police on public transport in Calais © HRO/Elio

# 4

## LIFE AT THE BORDER - "YOU CAN'T STAY"

**"It was new to me because it was the first time I slept in the forest with my son alone without any elements for life, like a primitive person. It was difficult when I wanted to drink or eat and sleep."**

*- I\*, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed by Florencia Doglioni*

Since the dismantling of the 'Big Jungle' in Calais in 2016 and La Linière in Dunkirk in 2017, people have lived in small camps with little to no infrastructure, referred to as 'informal living sites'. These usually consist of tents, sometimes on pallets to lift them away from the floor in an attempt to manage cold and rats. Sometimes people squat disused buildings, which offer a greater level of shelter and at times more infrastructure such as toilets or electricity; however, this is not the case for most people living at the border. These 'informal living sites' are often still called the 'jungle'.<sup>48</sup>

The state leaves people exposed in these living sites. People have the right to one night of shelter in state emergency accommodation (115), but after that can never claim any more nights there. However, many people are often refused this, especially single men. Although Centres d'Accueil et d'Examen des Situations (CAES) can offer shelter for families, these are far from Calais and Dunkirk and are often full.<sup>49</sup> By refusing to provide adequate shelter and meet basic needs for people with no other choice or support, the state enacts violence against them.

The informal living sites are deliberately difficult places to survive. State mandated food distributions and shower access are not consistently provided across all living sites and are insufficient to meet the need. The French state does not collect rubbish or provide sufficient water or access to hygiene services. As a result, informal living sites become unsanitary and unsafe. People are often unable to install any infrastructure to address these concerns as they will be removed in the police evictions described in 5b.

Although non-governmental organisations attempt to fill the gaps left by the state, they are constantly undermined by police and state actions. For example, Calais Food Collective regularly install water tanks at living sites and fill them daily to ensure people have some level of water access. However, these are often stolen by the police.

48 - For a more detailed description, see p.71,

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f61b76b5add8045f1294fa/t/66c2292445f9cb084da06589/1724000580850/FINAL+ENG+On+The+Border.pdf>

49 - <https://prezly.msf.org.uk/calais-msf-calls-on-french-authorities-to-provide-emergency-shelter-to-people-on-the-move>

**"The police came and tried to destroy the tank secretly. I don't know why...this water is life, especially in this jungle."**

- Testimony collected by Calais Food Collective, May 2025.<sup>50</sup>

The degrading living conditions people experience can exacerbate underlying mental health challenges or give rise to them. A psychologist working in Calais described:

**"There are a lot of people with obsessive disorders, a lot of depression, anxiety with OCD. Mostly though, people are suffering from PTSD and grief - grief they experience here or grief from their home country. Many people are grieving for their homeland and for the person they used to be. That's why we see a lot of aggressivity, a lot of anger, a lot of agitation and disorientation. And that's normal."**

- A psychologist working in Calais

## 4.a. UNSAFE LIVING CONDITIONS

**"We are not safe without enough food, shelter and blankets. With all the wind and rain we can't sleep."**

- Nabil, who we met in Calais in September 2025

Living conditions at the border are difficult and dangerous for physical and mental health. Selam described her experience of living in Dunkirk for 3 months:

**"It was very difficult because I was there in winter and it was very cold. We could only eat once a day at lunchtime, when the Red Cross gave us food. They gave us tea in the morning but that's it. We were 7 people in one tent and it was hard to keep good hygiene because we had no access to it."**

- Selam, who lived in Dunkirk for 3 months

50 - [https://www.instagram.com/p/DKPrCDZl8yt/?img\\_index=1&igsh=MWE5YXBsN3A1cjBobw==](https://www.instagram.com/p/DKPrCDZl8yt/?img_index=1&igsh=MWE5YXBsN3A1cjBobw==)

The unsanitary and unstable living conditions people are subjected to at the border, without access to basic services such as toilets, healthcare and shelter, are a form of violence in themselves.

As Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, explains:

**"The shortage of accommodation is also violent. Last winter, from 2 December to 31 March, we provided emergency accommodation for more than 500 people. Of those 500 people, more than 300, or more than half, were children, including children accompanied by their families and unaccompanied minors. And among the children with their families, the average age was 3 years old. So we're talking about children, families, women, etc.**

**These 500 people were, in fact, people who had been refused what we call common law, that is, a refusal by institutions to provide accommodation. So either the 115 [emergency state accommodation] had refused them, with the specificity here in Calais that the 115 only offers one night's accommodation for your entire life after which you no longer have accommodation and you have to go to the CAES, but with all the problems that accessing the CAES entails.<sup>51</sup>**



**115 refused this family in particular, who, if they hadn't been accommodated by MSF, would have been outside in very low temperatures, in winter. Although it's not direct physical violence, it's still very violent for these people. And that's how it is, when I told you that this violence is found in our psychological consultations, where one of the main reasons for consultation is the living conditions in Calais.**

**These are an accumulation of trauma, with trauma also potentially in their country of origin, which has built up until they arrive in Calais, where there is the added trauma of living conditions, shipwrecks, etc."**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*



This can lead to even the youngest children being exposed to freezing living conditions: K recounted a similarly difficult experience, saying:

**"It was freezing... I was trying very hard to keep A. [the son] warm but he wouldn't stop crying... It is very hard doing all of this with a baby."**

*- K, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed by Florencia Doglioni*

**"In an informal conversation, [K] also told me that the milk in her son's bottle froze and that the kid would not drink it and cry."**

*- Florencia Doglioni*

It is beyond the scope of this report to explore all the ways in which fundamental rights are denied to those at the border, and there are many existing reports which examine this in detail.<sup>52</sup> However, living conditions have also changed in recent years, in ways that expose people to greater levels of violence.

As a result of increased border securitisation and police interventions surrounding crossing attempts, coupled with the restrictions on lorry crossings, the amount of time people are stuck at the border has increased in recent years, exposing them to these difficult living conditions for longer. Hostile design that closes off potential living sites means people are also being increasingly pushed further away from city centres and services. Surveillance invades people's privacy and enables violence, whilst the unsanitary living conditions can cause and worsen illness and injury.

## INCREASED STAYS AT THE BORDER

In recent years, the average time people have spent at the border trying to cross to the UK has increased. Project Play reported that the average time children were stuck at the border increased from 2.5 weeks in 2023 to 3.7 weeks in 2024.<sup>53</sup> In 2025 this only increased further, as Joseph Givens from the Maria Skobtsova welcome house explains:

**"I've worked here for 3 years, and the first summer people would stay on average for a few days or a week at most. Now women and children are getting stuck for extremely long periods of time, for example we've got several people in the house at the moment who've been here for over 6 months. For many people it feels like there's no end in sight. The situation has just gotten worse and worse."**

*- Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova House*

52 - For example, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f61b76b5add8045f1294fa/t/66c2292445f9cb084da06589/1724000580850/FINAL+ENG+On+The+Border.pdf>

53 - [https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156\\_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23fbe5d77d.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23fbe5d77d.pdf)

This increase is due to the increased difficulty in crossing, as a result of higher levels of security at the border. People attempt to cross and fail, and are stuck at the border until they succeed or give up (temporarily or permanently). This means people are stuck in informal living sites with unsanitary and dangerous living conditions for longer, increasing the institutional violence they experience.



*Police evict a living site underneath a bridge, Calais © HRO/Léonard*

## HOSTILE DESIGN AND INCREASING ISOLATION FROM SERVICES AND CITY CENTRES

Along with eviction operations, the French authorities seek to reclaim the environments people camp out in. They do this by fencing up former living areas so they are inaccessible, cutting down trees so certain sites offer less shelter, placing large rocks in these spaces so there is no space to camp, and/or making huge ruts in the earth with agricultural machinery so the land is too muddy to camp on.

The Human Rights Observers also document such practices in their 2024 report.<sup>54</sup> These practices of land reclamation add to the uncertainty and inconsistency of people's experience living in makeshift camps at the border.

**"As soon as the camps reach 200 people, they [the authorities] try to scatter them, and so people put themselves in danger, moving further and further away from the city, making it very difficult for organisations to access them. These people become extremely vulnerable and no longer have access to assistance."**

*- Mariam, Secours Catholique*

Authorities in Calais and Dunkirk have increasingly used hostile design to close off potential living sites, as well as distribution sites used by organisations to offer people services. One of the clearest examples of this is the use of large rocks to block people from pitching tents. For example in November 2024, 3200 tonnes of rocks were placed alongside the river in central Calais to block people from camping there.<sup>55</sup>

These same large rocks were used to close off a distribution site in Loon-Plage, Dunkirk in September 2024. The next distribution site which the state allowed organisations to use was much smaller and a grass field rather than a paved area, meaning distributions were more chaotic which led to greater intercommunity tension when trying to access often oversubscribed services.

This was the latest link in a chain of similar incidents where slightly more suitable distribution sites have been blocked by the authorities, impacting people's access to vital services and increasing the risk of conflict and violence as people struggle to meet their needs.

As a result of these and similar actions by the state, including permanent evictions of established living sites, people are increasingly isolated from city centres and services offered by charities, as many NGO workers explained to us in summer 2025.



*Large rocks placed along riverside, Calais, November 2024 © Maria Hagan*

**"[as a result of securitisation], people are increasingly far from the city and therefore from the services that go with it, like tobacconists, cafés, even drinking water, the Secours Catholique day centre, and so on. Gradually, people are moving further and further away because the places where they live are being cleared and barriers are being put up, so they're going further and further with the stones and all that. And it's just the same in Grande Synthe, in fact, before, people were closer to Dunkirk."**

*- Team member, HRO*

55 - <https://www.politis.fr/articles/2024/11/calais-3200-tonnes-de-rochers-contre-les-personnes-exilees/>

**"[securitisation] also has an impact in general when people are forced to hide, to stay away from traditional aid centres, so to speak. It affects their access to food and water, etc. And so all these reduced needs accumulate and create general distress."**

- Angèle Vettorello, *Utopia 56*

Rasta from Secours Catholique explained how this has changed since the dismantling of the 'Big Jungle' in 2016:

**"And I would be tempted to say that it's also much easier now that there are far fewer people. Before, there were around 10,000 to 12,000 people in Calais, so it was more difficult to commit abuses. Now there are far fewer people and the camps are a bit isolated, scattered around the city. And especially at night, there are no witnesses, there's nothing at all, and it's much easier to commit this kind of [police] abuse. The jungle hasn't actually disappeared from Calais. It has become urbanised. It's no longer the jungle it was in 2015... This jungle is now scattered, it is in all four corners of the city and has become an urban jungle, but the jungle is still there. Yes, but without... Without being in one fixed location."**

- Rasta, *Secours Catholique*

Similar can be said for La Linière camp in Grande Synthe. It was opened in March 2016, a collaboration with the Mayor of Grande Synthe, Médecins sans Frontières and a range of civil society organisations in an attempt to improve the abhorrent living conditions of approximately 3000 men, women and children in Basroch, a disused football pitch turned informal living site near the centre of the town.

**"The camp's management was handed over to a state mandated organisation towards the end of 2016, resulting in poor management, disrepair and smuggler control which contributed to a devastating fire in April 2017 destroying the camp. No effort was made to repair this damage and it was entirely demolished just days later. Immediately people were forced into more precarious situations, with people forced to hide in woodlands and wastelands with a cycle of repeat evictions forcing people further and further from urban areas and support services."**

- Maddie Harris, *Humans for Rights Network*

When we asked Aram, who arrived in the UK in December 2024, what needed to improve at the border, he suggested that large camp infrastructure which supported people's stay would be useful:

**"Well that's been there for quite a long time now and the immigration is going on and I think it's not gonna... ease up so soon with all the situations that we've got in different countries. But in France, although they are kind of helpful as well themselves, but I think about the jungle, they could have made a camp in Calais or Dunkirk, somewhere close to the sea, some sort of facility [for] these people to stay in as long as they need to stay there. They're going to come and stay in the jungle, which is not the safest place for them, for everyone. I would say a camp for refugees would do a great deal of help."**

*- Aram, who arrived in the UK in December 2024*

Selam shared a similar perspective:

**"We think France is a safe place after our hard long journeys. But then we experience the police there and realise it is not safe. It is heartbreaking and dangerous. We need safety for all trying to cross. It would be more safe if there were more places like the Red Cross, who are able to give food, clothes, and hygiene stuff. This would be really helpful for all refugees there. That's the biggest part of their struggle there. Safety is the most important. We don't feel safe even if we see police in France because we know they came to take our clothes and other things there, so we only feel safe when we see the Red Cross. To have a small place to stay somewhere there would be good before trying to cross to the UK."**

*- Selam, who was in Dunkirk for 3 months*

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK and French governments must **collaborate to create and fund a dignified and safe reception for people on the move in northern France**, including shelter, access to food, water and hygiene services, and access to adapted safeguarding support.

## INCREASED SURVEILLANCE

Increased UK funding for the securitisation of the border has often been directed towards increased surveillance, in the form of more cameras, drones and surveillance infrastructure.<sup>56</sup> For people on the move, this means they are constantly under surveillance and lose their privacy even more within living sites. HRO team members explain:

**"The simple fact that the police are everywhere, the cameras, the drones, the planes, the police weapons and physical violence as such, plus racism everywhere when it comes to access to trains, access to transport and living conditions, the rubbish equipment, not much access to water, difficulty getting food, etc - it means that state violence is very present at the border and people who are stuck at the border are never safe. So the state puts them in danger at any moment with random checks, so they can never feel safe.**

**What has got worse, I think, is the resources. There are always more police officers, even though we've always had a lot, always more and more resources deployed. There have always been cameras in Calais, but there are more and more of them, the same along the entire coast, drones, etc."**

*- Team members, HRO*

### RECOMMENDATION

#### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The UK and French governments must **divert spending on militarisation to provide humanitarian assistance**, with a group convened including experts by experience and NGOs to determine adequate use of this funding.

## ILLNESS AND INJURY RELATED TO LIVING SITES

Living in these conditions can both cause and worsen injury and illness. Indeed, it is one of the primary causes of injury and illness for people on the border.

For instance, over the course of a year, between May 2024 and April 2025, the Margelle welcome house hosted at least sixty-one injured people. Fifteen were ill or injured as a result of poor living conditions outdoors and in makeshift camps at the border.



Dehab, a woman who spent two months in Calais, described how living conditions at the border worsened an existing disability:

“Because I have disabilities in my leg it was really hard to move around. I had a car accident that affected my leg before, but in France because of travelling back and forth it got a lot worse. It’s better now [that I am in the UK].”

- Dehab, who spent two months in Calais

Médecins du Monde observed the impacts of poor living conditions on patients living in informal living sites in Dunkirk.

**In 2023, 88% of the treatment [ Médecins du Monde ] provided was related to people’s poor living conditions.**

A member of the Médecins du Monde team explained:

**"[Most of the illnesses we treat relate] to people's poor living conditions. So illnesses related to precarity, for example skin conditions. A lot of scabies, of course, because there's so little access to water and hygiene facilities. So scabies, superinfected scabies. A lot of infected cuts and wounds that get over-infected because they aren't cleaned properly. Those are the main things. Then there are ear, nose and throat and pneumatic issues, because people sleep out in the cold. So these are all really linked to the poor living conditions, the absence of housing, of hygiene facilities."**

*- Team member, Médecins du Monde*

Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, noted similar trends in Calais in 2024 and 2025:

**"The main reasons for consultation are related to symptoms and physical pathologies caused by precarious living conditions and the consequences of attempts to cross the border. So we have respiratory disease in first place, at least for 2025, infectious skin problems such as scabies, fungal infections, superinfected wounds, inflammatory and vascular problems, with frostbite, because of the cold weather. We also see diffuse pain, a lot of pain... and a lot of head pain, a lot related to...the lack of water. We have a lot of people coming to see us because they have headaches, and in fact when we ask them if they've been drinking water, they've been drinking very, very little water. In fact, we developed this [poster about the effects of not drinking water] last year, to raise awareness about drinking water. But you can be aware of the issue, yet if you don't have access to water, you can't drink water."**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

The lack of access to water was also raised by Rasta at Secours Catholique. Here he describes how this is emblematic of the wider issues of poor living conditions at the border:

**"This violence is a daily occurrence. It is also evident in the dismantling of camps every 48 hours, or even every day. Also, there are not enough water points. We are in the middle of a heatwave, and people have to walk 5 km to fetch water, when it is also the state's role to provide water for everyone..."**

...What scares me a little is that we tend to trivialise all this, it becomes a bit mundane, it's normal, they're just migrants, so that's really what worries me today. But this violence is a daily occurrence. Every day. Here at the day centre, incidents of state violence are reported on a daily basis."

- Rasta, Secours Catholique

This lack of access to basic rights is intentional state policy. By refusing to offer adequate services to people on the move in Calais and Dunkirk, the UK and French governments aim to "deter" people from staying at, and crossing, the border. The message is clear: people on the move aren't welcome to stay.

The myth that refusing to meet people's most basic human rights will discourage them from coming to northern France and attempting to reach the UK has been pervasive since at least the closure of the Sangatte camp in 2002. However, as the intervening years have shown, making people's lives difficult does not stop them from trying to cross the border. Indeed, it is one reason that for many people France cannot be considered a safe country, making the UK seem a more appealing prospect than somewhere that has forced them to live in tents without food, water or toilets.

"And if you choose to stay in France, most immigrants have to live in the street. It's not good for an immigrant...Every immigrant wants to live in a place where they can have a good situation, where they choose."

- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025

## VIOLENCE RELATED TO PRECARIOUS LIVING CONDITIONS AND MATERIAL SCARCITY

The total lack of access to resources that underscores these difficult living conditions can provoke a violent response, as scarcity means people are forced to compete for every basic necessity. As a cultural mediator described,

"Whenever there's a distribution, be it shoes, blankets, tents, SIM cards etcetera, there's never enough for everyone. Most associations have to do secret drop-offs to avoid fights."

- Cultural mediator

Competition over resources means thefts can occur among people on the move, and that fights sometimes break out. Yousef, who was living in Calais when we met him in September 2025, explained:

**"There is too much stealing here. Someone stole my phone when I was sleeping, and now I have a rubbish phone. It's because they don't have any money, so they have to steal."**

*- Yousef, who was in Calais in September 2025*

Rasta, an employee at the Secours Catholique, explained:

**"What happens between different groups in the camps - phone thefts, money thefts, racketeering perpetrated by certain groups - it's not a majority of people, it's always a minority who attack other groups. But the latest incidents of settling scores have been pretty violent, they were always because of racketeering, theft, and money extortion attempts."**

*- Rasta, Secours Catholique*

Indeed, acts of theft and racketeering can quickly escalate to violent settling of scores. Moreover, competition over resources can lead to violence that has a devastating impact. Fadil for example, a Sudanese man who was left paraplegic after falling victim to violence in the Dunkirk camps in 2022, explained that he had been a random target of retribution against people of his nationality:

**"I hadn't been in Dunkirk for very long when it happened - about a month. The way the problems began was that there were 2 people. I think one of them was Kurdish, and the other Sudanese. They fought about how to make the line, one said wait in the line and the other said no I won't. They started fighting and lots of people came, one person started spraying pepper spray... Later that evening, around 6 or 7 o'clock some Kurdish guys came to our camp and started shooting at us. Several people were injured, but my case was the most serious I think."**

*- Fadil, who was in Dunkirk in summer 2022*

Marianne from the Maison Margelle described this type of violence as fairly common:

**"At ours there are people who have fallen off lorries, broken legs, sprains, dislocated shoulders, all of that. But there are also people who have been stabbed - knife wounds, blade wounds, screwdrivers to eyes... Last winter, we hosted three people who had lost an eye in Calais in fights..."**

*- Marianne, Maison Margelle*

Violence also often breaks out in the camps, in arguments over territory in the camps or on the beaches, or as a result of arguments that emerge during crossing attempts and for which retribution will later be sought out in the camps. Mahmoud, an unaccompanied Sudanese teenager, explained:

**"The people in Dunkirk were fighting a lot when it was time for the meal. There were lots of different nationalities who couldn't understand each other. People were everywhere. Some were staying near organisations, some far away, some people under the bridges. People were using wood to fight - tree branches and broken glass bottles. There were too many people. Sometimes people were fighting, but not every day... Not in our camp but in the camp near us a fight happened in the early morning. In the middle of the night people came and stabbed other people in the camp. Police and the ambulance came. The next day when we went to the organisations they told us about it. I don't know if they died or not."**

*- Mahmoud, who arrived to the UK in early 2025*

However, **interpersonal violence does not emerge in a vacuum**. It is crucial to examine the root causes of such incidents. People on the move have often experienced trauma in their home country or over the course of their migration journey, and are subjected to further violence at the border. This contributes to a worrisome normalisation of and perpetuation of violence among some individuals. As Rasta described:

**"I don't condone this kind of behaviour of course, but the survival conditions they're living in, the distress caused by their family calling them from home, countries that are being bombarded on a daily basis... That can explain this violence, even if we don't agree with it. Unfortunately, violence is part of the migration journey. And I don't think anyone came to Calais to be subjected to violence. I think that all along their migration route, basically, they've been confronted with violence, especially in Libya. So for some people, it's banal, it's part of their everyday life, because it's part of their journey."**

*- Rasta, Secours Catholique*

People who have undergone these traumatic experiences should be offered a dignified and supportive welcome by the state. Instead, scarcity of resources and ongoing precarious living situations means these tensions sometimes result in violence. The reality of surviving with insufficient access to all basic necessities means people may be pushed to compete for resources. People are also exhausted from lack of shelter to sleep, rest, or offer any privacy. They are under huge financial pressure as they have no choice but to pay smugglers to help them cross the Channel, and in a constant state of limbo with no sense of stability in France or certainty of reaching the UK soon.

It is unsurprising, under such circumstances, that some people sometimes treat others in the community with violence, particularly when vital resources are unavailable. This is further worsened by violent police operations which undermine and divide communities, as sections 4b and 4c show. The responsibility for this lies with the French and UK governments who have decided to spend money on violent police operations rather than shelter, food and hygiene services for people on the move in northern France.



## 4.b. EVICTIONS

*The police arrive to evict a living site, and someone carries their tent out of the eviction perimeter - 21st May 2024. © HRO/Léonard*

**"The police there are like soldiers but without guns - it's like a war"**

*- Moussa, who lived in Calais in December 2024*

Since the closure of the 'Big Jungle' and 'La Linière' camps in 2016 and 2017, in the interest of the UK's policy of deterrence and prevention, the French state has pursued a 'no points of fixation' policy, evicting living sites every 2-3 days to stop another large camp from forming. This is allegedly to deter people from travelling to northern France and then attempting to cross to the UK, although the year on year increase in crossings since then shows this has not been the case.<sup>57</sup>

In practice, this means that an intimidating convoy of several police vehicles and a clean up team visit every living site every 2-3 days to evict it. If people are not present to move or protect their belongings, these are taken.<sup>58</sup> In 2024, Human Rights Observers observed at least 782 evictions in Calais and 36 in Dunkirk.<sup>59</sup>

People are often arbitrarily arrested during evictions: in 2024, HRO were aware of 209 arrests across both Calais and Dunkirk during evictions (although it is possible there were others which they were unable to document).<sup>60</sup> These are often random and few per eviction, rather than everyone systematically being arrested. This again creates a climate of psychological violence in which people are constantly uncertain, unstable and at risk.

**"I was arrested by the police in the jungle when they were taking tents. I tried to get my glasses from my tent when I was arrested but I wasn't allowed...My only 'crime' was not having papers."**

- Bashir, who we met in Calais in September 2025

In 2021, Humans Rights Watch found that these eviction operations constituted inhuman and degrading treatment, yet the French authorities have continued to carry out these operations.<sup>61</sup>

In 2024, Human Rights Observers (HRO) recorded at least 16,365 people affected by eviction operations in Calais and Dunkirk, but considered this to be an underestimation of the true number affected.<sup>62</sup>

\*HRO statistics for Calais and Dunkirk, 2024

**818**  
evictions\*

**16,365**  
people affected\*

**"These evictions have consequences. They make people's situations even more precarious, preventing any form of stability in an environment that is already extremely precarious. They also require organisation, which in turn prevents access to healthcare. In fact, it further reduces the scope of rights and fundamental needs, which are already severely limited at the border."**

- Flore Judet, L'Auberge des Migrants

The evictions themselves constitute a form of violence, uprooting people regularly and forcing

58 - For a more detailed explanation of evictions, see <https://humanrightsobservers.org/reports/>  
59, 60 - <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rapport-Annuel-2024-FR.pdf>  
61 - [hrw.org/report/2021/10/07/enforced-misery/degrading-treatment-migrant-children-and-adults-northern-france](https://hrw.org/report/2021/10/07/enforced-misery/degrading-treatment-migrant-children-and-adults-northern-france)  
62 - <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rapport-Annuel-2024-FR.pdf>

them to move all their possessions. Tents are already an inadequate form of shelter, yet they are rendered even more unstable by these police operations as they are often destroyed or confiscated by police, including being slashed with knives. Where people do manage to save their tents, this is by moving them out of the perimeter, meaning they have to dismantle their own shelter and then reinstall it again. This has a material effect of frequently depriving people of their only access to shelter, and also the psychological effect of people needing to constantly be on guard, fearful of police presence, and without privacy or security in their living situation.

**In just one month, August 2025, at least 121 tents were seized in Calais alone, 22 of them full of belongings.**

People often experience a cycle of getting a new tent, losing it, and then having to acquire a new tent again. Selam, who spent 3 months in Dunkirk, explained:



**"My experience with French police is that they took our tents away in the jungle. We had to go to the Red Cross and get another tent, but then it would happen again."**

- Selam, who lived in Dunkirk for 3 months

Police confiscate a tent during an eviction in Calais on 19th August 2024. © HRO/Elio

Human Rights Observers (HRO) explain the dual material and psychological impact of evictions on individuals:

**"It's so destabilising for mental health, it's dangerous... and to put it very clearly, there are people who say 'we've waited for two weeks to have a tent and the next day the police came and stole it from us,' and that's how the system works really."**

- Team members, HRO

Project Play explains how evictions psychologically affect children in their 2025 report 'We Want to be Safe'.<sup>63</sup> The range of impacts includes children hiding behind playworkers' legs when police appear; children being unable to join in play sessions as they had to keep watch for the police coming to take their tents; and children re-enacting police evictions as they played.

**"On 16th October 2024, we were playing with some children at a living site. A 3-year-old started shouting police over and over and lining up cars into different formations, like the eviction convoy. He was in a heightened emotional state and very disregulated. Then other children started to play police 'games', including being quiet so the police wouldn't find them and hiding from the police under tables."**

*- Ilias, welfare coordinator, Project Play*

Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025 and crossed to the UK in spring 2025, described his experiences of evictions in Dunkirk:

**"In the jungle, the police came every time. They damaged the houses we'd made. And what we call the camp - they would just destroy it, burn it, break it with their sticks. It was so difficult to survive for a long period of time... Especially the police are not good. The police expelled [those] the Red Cross people from the environment, who supply our food. We were so angry, we were so tired, and we had no choice but to move here and there. When the police came, everybody was asleep. They [came] early in the morning to break everything. Everybody was shouting, crying. They are not like humans, okay? Even the devil cannot do this kind of work. Some of them just kicked us. Just saying [imitating police] "wake up, wake up... What are you doing? You are from another country... The black one, come on out, come out...". And we were afraid to ask any questions because we didn't have the right to speak...**

**The police would kick, I have seen, with my eye. Yeah, I have seen it. This is a kind of violence. They destroyed every home, every camp. They start from the very beginning, and they go through every jungle with a lot of machines and armoured force. Cars surrounded us at the lake. There were 25 to 30 police, they had everything: the radio communication, the machinery, the sticks... They were ready to dismantle the society we have in the jungle... When we were there, they expelled us, saying "Go, go, go outside from this jungle. Go outside." I'm not exactly sure, but our friends told me that they were taken by a bus....Really, it was so harsh, really harsh."**

*- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025*



*A digger disposes of people's blankets during an eviction in Dunkirk, 25th June 2024. Diggers and other large vehicles are often used as part of large scale evictions. © HRO/Alexis*

During large scale evictions which seek to clear living sites permanently, and even more regularly in Dunkirk evictions, people are forced to board buses which will disperse them from Calais and Dunkirk to accommodation centres far from the coast.

This undermines people's autonomy and constitutes a form of state violence as people are moved around against their will.

The accommodation centres are also insufficient for the number of people who are evicted from the living site and many people are left destitute, with no access to shelter of any form, not even a tent.

Police also attempt to deter people from documenting these evictions, whether they are people living in the living sites or volunteers from organisations like HRO. As Abel describes:

**"The police didn't want you to talk to the [HRO volunteers]. They also called the [HRO volunteers], they asked for their ID number and they took a photograph of their ID. "**

*- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025*

The police use a range of intimidation tactics to try and prevent this documentation, which demonstrates that they themselves know the levels of violence in evictions are not acceptable. This includes targeting people on the move who are attempting to document evictions, as well as the intimidation of solidarity actors like HRO who carry out similar actions.<sup>64</sup> Police often tell people, incorrectly, that they are not allowed to film police operations, and use fines and identity checks to try and deter documentation of their work.

The police carrying out eviction operations often employ violence in other ways during the clearances.

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64 - For more details of police intimidation, see [https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/280621592/We\\_know\\_who\\_you\\_are\\_Report\\_EN.pdf](https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/280621592/We_know_who_you_are_Report_EN.pdf) and <https://www.ldh-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Rapport-obs-Calais-VD.pdf>

## USE OF TEAR GAS AND OTHER WEAPONRY

In 2024, Médecins sans Frontières noted the frequent use of tear gas and rubber bullets during evictions.

**MSF underlined how unaccompanied children were subject to these violences as frequently as adults, with no concern for their particular vulnerability.<sup>65</sup>**

Human Rights Observers (HRO) describe one of many incidences of the use of tear gas:

**"On Tuesday, September 23, 2025, two members of the HRO association were present in Dunkirk. As the HRO team approached the living site across the fields, they could hear cries in the distance. As they got closer, they could see large clouds of smoke rising from the groves where the living quarters were located. The wind carried the cloud, and the smell of tear gas could be detected from a hundred meters away. The pair continued to observe for at least half an hour and saw about fifteen CRS officers walking along the railroad tracks, entering several living areas on the site. With each wooded area, a new cloud of gas was released, accompanied by screams.**

**Later, the HRO team was able to talk to several residents of the living areas who had been evicted with tear gas as they returned to the site of their tents. Several people testified that they were awakened by the arrival of the police and the use of tear gas. They stated that the police did not give them time to collect their belongings or comply before using tear gas. The HRO team met a pregnant woman and a 4-year-old child who were present during the events. Two men also reported that their phones had been stolen by the police. Another person testified that his cash had been stolen that morning by a police officer, who allegedly took the money from his bag."**

*- Human Rights Observers*

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65 - <https://www.msf.fr/actualites/mineurs-non-accompagnes-a-calais-des-violences-repetees-et-banalisees>

Mahmoud, an unaccompanied 17 year old from Sudan who arrived in the UK in early 2025, describes the violence of police evictions accompanied by weaponry:

**"The police came and let us all go out of the camp and burned the camp. Lots of camps were burned by fire by the police in Dunkirk. The police didn't put the fire out, they let the fire go out by itself. It always happened. We just went to the forest and stayed there, trying to go to organisations. Whenever we moved they burned the camp with our clothes, tents, and foods. I'm not sure how many of us there were - maybe 8 or 9 in a group all together. They didn't let us sleep at night, they just fired in the sky not to let us sleep. It happened every day. They shot in the air to scare us and then they went. We were in the camp and we were in the trees hiding. When they came they shot guns so we knew they were there and then we ran away, so they didn't speak to us."**

*- Mahmoud, an unaccompanied 17 year old who arrived to the UK in early 2025*

These violent evictions do not stop people from surviving in informal living sites in Calais and Dunkirk. They do not function as a deterrent because people have no alternative. Instead, they cause significant psychological and physical harm to all people on the move, including the most vulnerable, making it clear that they are not welcome in France and that their human rights and basic dignity not respected.

## **CONFISCATION OF BELONGINGS (INCLUDING MEDICATION)**

Police regularly confiscate and damage belongings during evictions. For example, in 2024 1685 tents were confiscated in Calais alone; 122 of these were filled with personal belongings.<sup>66</sup> Some belongings are deliberately destroyed by police, as evidenced by a testimony collected by HRO in September 2024:

**"The police arrived at his living site around 8:30 a.m. There were about fifty police officers. He was still in his tent and when he heard the police shouting at him to come out, he did not come out immediately. A police officer slashed his tent with three knife blows. This officer reportedly did the same thing to three of his friends."**

*- Human Rights Observers*

This is particularly damaging when people have added vulnerabilities:

**"This winter [2024/2025] something which really struck us, was that there was an epidemic of flu at one point at the end of January, beginning of February. And we treated lots of people in our nurse consultations who had flu or similar symptoms including lots of people who had fevers. They asked us for accommodation so we called the 115 [French accommodation services] but it was totally oversubscribed, there was no space. And actually, those people no longer had tents because that same morning there had been an eviction. Their tents had been taken. So these are sick people who have a fever, who have flu, who have no access to shelter and then their only tiny protection against the cold, that is to say their tent, has been taken."**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

The 'zero point of fixation' policy here is clearly designed to strip people of protections and put them at risk, again causing psychological and physical harm.



Phones are one of the most important resources for people in northern France. They allow people to remain in contact with friends and family outside of France. They are also essential for accessing support services in France, from asylum information to staying in touch with humanitarian organisations and accessing information about the services on offer. If people wish to seek accommodation such as through the 115, they need to be able to call. Without a phone, people are left vulnerable and isolated. Yet in recent years phones have been increasingly targeted by police, as Rasta from Secours Catholique describes:

**"The biggest incidents, the most recurring ones, the ones that come up every time, are mainly phone thefts and mix-ups. So you know, like me, anyone who has a phone has their whole life in it. You have your photos, your history, but you also have your contacts, which allow you to cross borders. And I really think that the French police want to target phones, with the excuse of looking for contacts and dismantling networks, potential networks. But we can see that... according to the most recent testimonies, it's gratuitous violence. In fact, the phones aren't even confiscated, sometimes they're broken on the spot."**

*- Rasta, Secours Catholique*

Prescriptions and medication are also often confiscated during evictions, putting people's health at risk.

**"We've supported several young people who have lost their prescription or their medication. This means there's disruption to medical care which we've observed as a medical organisation. This means that actually this 'zero points of fixation' policy also has consequences for people's access to healthcare... We also supported a person, an adult whose glasses were broken during an eviction, and we know that it's very difficult to access an optician and get new glasses. So this 'zero point of fixation' policy has consequences on people's bodies... and also on their mental wellbeing. We've seen that through the psychological support we offer too... Sometimes we also see people we support miss medical appointments because of being taken elsewhere in buses after an eviction. Notably, recently we had this experience with a pregnant woman who had an important gynaecology appointment and had to miss it because of an eviction."**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

A doctor working at a local clinic described how she was surprised to see patients come back just a few days after having received their treatment:

**"But they would explain, 'the police took our tents with the medicine inside, they didn't even let us take our stuff!' I didn't really believe it at first, but then they showed me the videos. I just can't understand why they [the police] do it."**

*- Former doctor at la PASS*

By creating and funding the policies that create such police operations, the French and UK governments show that they are not concerned with the safety of people on the move, but instead with making their lives as difficult as possible whilst they are at the border.

## ASYLUM CLAIM DOCUMENTS

During eviction operations, people often also report losing important documents like asylum claim and identity documents that they had with them in a bag or in their tent which were confiscated. This can have serious repercussions on a person's administrative status, essentially rendering a person undocumented.

While it is impossible to know whether the confiscation of such documents by the police during evictions is intentional, it discourages people on the move from pursuing asylum procedures in France, reinforcing the sentiment that **"You can't stay, but you can't go."**

Such situations occur so often that the Secours Catholique have developed a procedure for supporting people in reporting the loss of their documents so they can apply for a new copy. A cultural mediator working at the Secours Catholique explained:

**"Sometimes they lose their asylum application acknowledgment [récépissé] or financial assistance card for asylum seekers [carte OFII]. People never put in a complaint with the police if they lose their tent, but if they lose their asylum claim document or more personal belongings, they might want to, because they're really important. The police in Calais would never accept to file a complaint about this, so what we do is declare the lost document to Coallia [association involved in asylum procedures] - sometimes it works, sometimes not - and we write a letter to explain the situation..."**

...so people can go to the police station in Lille to report a loss or theft there. Then they have a declaration of the loss of the card, a police declaration document, and with those they can apply for a new document or card."

- Cultural mediator, Secours Catholique



## 2025 - INCREASING VIOLENCE

In 2025, HRO noted a significant increase in the number and intensity of evictions in Grande Synthe, Dunkirk.



"The situation in Grande Synthe, I don't know how to describe it, but the number of police officers who are deployed every week and who carry out large-scale evictions has increased... Well, in Grande Synthe there are several camps that are being evicted, and it's a very large area, and right now it's every week. The only access to water was cut off during an eviction and they repaired it, but it was still cut off for several hours.

The increase in evictions came after a meeting in Loon Plage [in late April 2025] that the mayor had convened with the sub-prefect responsible for immigration security and the sub-prefect of Dunkirk, following complaints from people living in his municipality, but no doubt it wasn't triggered by this meeting, it just happened after this meeting and was one of the things announced at the meeting. Clearly, more police resources were needed to try and ensure that people would stop resettling and, according to the official line, to put an end to the smuggling networks, or at least destabilise them.

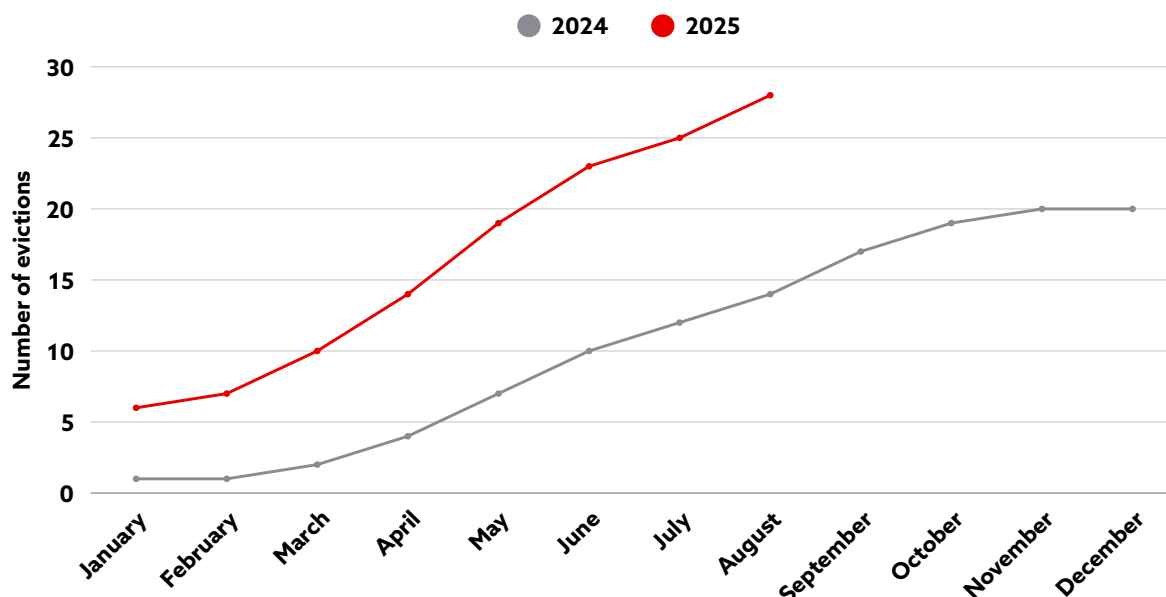
And so the stated objectives are to scatter people, in the hope that they will not resettle in the places they've been evicted from, and to destabilise the transit networks. We've already reached more evictions in Grande Synthe than the whole of last year [2024] and it's only July [2025]... There is also a lot of violence... as we see it, evictions also cause a lot of tension in communities...



...During that meeting in Loon Plage, basically all the measures they announced, they said they were financed by the Sandhurst agreement, for literally everything. When he talked about police officers on buses, he said it was Sandhurst. When they talked about rubbish bins, they said it was Sandhurst. When they talked about cleaning companies, they said it was the Sandhurst funds."

- Human Rights Observers

### Evictions in Dunkirk, January 2024 - August 2025



**Figure 3:** Evictions in Dunkirk, January 2024 - August 2025

Source: HRO August 2025 Monthly update.<sup>67</sup>

Here the truth of the evictions is exposed: they exist to enact UK border policy by attempting (unsuccessfully) to deter people from coming to the border to try and cross to the UK. French politicians justify the expense of evictions by saying they are paid for by the UK; violent evictions increase in number and intensity as anti-migrant rhetoric ramps up on both sides of the Channel. Again, the message that people cannot stay in France is clear.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK and French governments must **work together to end the 'zero point of fixation' policy** (enacted by widespread violent evictions), including **ending UK funding** for these operations.

## 4.c. RANDOM POLICE VIOLENCE

**"It's not right what the police did. But we're not going to complain. Who are we going to complain to?"**

*- Jamal, who witnessed police brutality in March 2025*

Police also carry out violent acts against people on the move outside of the eviction cycle and crossing attempts. Random arrests and stop and search, as well as inhumane treatment whilst in police custody are all examples of this constant police harassment and violence.

Between March and September 2025, Utopia 56 recorded 680 people affected by police violence outside of crossing attempts: an average of 97 people per month, or over 3 victims of police violence per day. Of course, this is likely to be an under-reporting, as not every person who is a victim of police violence would consider reporting or want to report this to Utopia 56. However, it demonstrates that police violence is a constant presence for people on the move.

The police often treat people on the move inhumanely, refusing to use translators and threatening people, as well as using physical violence. A HRO team member explains:

**680**

people affected by police violence outside of crossing attempts

**97**

people per month

**3+**

people per day

**"So for me, police violence also involves police presence and random checks which can happen anywhere at any time, and physical violence, particularly along the beaches. But it also seems that when people are arrested, they are humiliated by the police, who address them informally when they are supposed to use formal language, and they make no effort to speak English.**

**And then there are the conditions of administrative detention, which are like police custody and seem to be quite horrific, as well as physical violence, which leaves people with lasting injuries, and also the theft of phones and belongings, tear gas being used on belongings, and constant harassment."**

*- Team member, Human Rights Observers*

Constant police harassment and violence against people on the move at the border is far from new. For example, in 2011 Calais Migrant Solidarity published a report on police violence from 2009-2011 in Calais. It examines the use of direct physical force to injure people as well as "the systematic use of ID checks and arrest" as a "programme of harassment". One case study in the report reads:

**"One recent case of note, of which we have video evidence, involves a migrant who had fallen on train tracks fleeing the police, being beaten unconscious while on the ground, before being hauled into an arrest van (3rd February, 2011). When activists arrived on the scene, the police first tried to suggest that they were attempting to help the fallen migrant, but soon sought to get rid of the camera and continued to beat the man as well as another."**<sup>68</sup>

- Calais Migrant Solidarity

There are many other reports over decades which show the continuation of this violence.<sup>69</sup> Despite this constant police brutality, it has been close to impossible for individuals or organisations to challenge it. Instead, it is shockingly routine for people on the move to experience this and have no way of holding the authorities accountable.

Indeed, it is clearly an extension of official policy to create a hostile environment for people in northern France. Although this is not explicitly part of governmental policy as far as the public are aware, the lack of accountability for violence shows that the state is happy to include these actions within its treatment of people on the move.

The French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) described how people on the move in northern France are particularly vulnerable to a lack of access to legal support:

**"Migrant people in the Calais area, who experience being told their living sites will be evicted under legal protocols or under erroneous protocols, can't exercise their right to appeal due to their situation of extreme precarity."**<sup>70</sup>

People feel that there is nowhere to report violence to, particularly when it comes from the state. There is no trust that people will be heard or accountability reached. This is a realistic outlook given the evidence of how complaints are handled. Human Rights Observers explain in their 2024 annual report:

68 - <https://nobordertestblog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/english-dossier.pdf>

69 - For some examples, see <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/synthc3a8se-calais-2-ans-aprc3a8s.pdf> ; [https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/calais\\_calais\\_en.pdf](https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/calais_calais_en.pdf) ; <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/face-a-la-frontiere-conv.pdf> ; [https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RRE\\_FiveYearsOn.pdf](https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RRE_FiveYearsOn.pdf)  
70 - Pg 7, <https://cncdh.fr/sites/default/files/2024-08/A%20-%202022%20-%204%20-%20Acc%C3%A8s%20aux%20droits%20et%20non-recours%2C%20mars%202022.pdf>

**"During our work as HRO, contesting police actions legally is made difficult by several factors. First of all, the fact that victims of police violence have to address their complaints to police officers to hold their colleagues accountable can incite fear and distrust. Also, legal processes are a long term process, even more so when they are holding law enforcement to account."**

- Human Rights Observers

Several cases of explicit police violence against people on the move through the indiscriminate use of weapons including tear gas and flashballs (among others) have occurred and been documented over the years, yet only a few have been taken to litigation. One example is the case of Janan, hit in the face with a flashball in 2016.<sup>71</sup> After 6 years, the Administrative Tribunal in Lille finally found the state to be 50% liable for the damage caused to this individual, but dropped charges against any individual police officer as they could not specify who had fired the weapon.<sup>72</sup>

Then there's the case of Bhrané G., shot in the head with a flashball in 2021.<sup>73</sup> Bhrané suffered a depressed skull fracture and several facial fractures, requiring two months of care in neurology wards. It is forbidden for police to aim at people's heads when using these weapons, and they should optimally be used at a distance of 25 metres. In both cited cases, the victims were hit in the head at a distance of around 10 metres. To date, in Bhrané's case, HRO have still had no follow up from the legal authorities.<sup>74</sup>

Both cases emphasise the lengthy nature of these kinds of legal procedures, and the limited success they tend to have.

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.

## RANDOM VIOLENCE IN LIVING SITES

Police sometimes commit random acts of violence within people's living sites. As a result people live in constant uncertainty and fear of police coming to commit violence against them, with the feeling that at any moment, violence could strike. A Sudanese man we spoke to in Calais in July 2025, who wished to remain anonymous, reported his experience of this:

71 - <https://www.streetpress.com/sujet/1669646708-etat-condamne-mutile-refugie-exile-afghan-tir-flash-ball-migrants-calais-violences-policieres-maintien-ordre>

72 - For more info, pg. 59-60 <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rapport-Annuel-2024-FR.pdf>

73 - <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/090321/victime-d-un-tir-de-lbd-un-erythreen-porte-plainte-et-veut-faire-reconnaitre-la-responsabilite-de-l-etat>

74 - For more info, pg. 59-60 <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rapport-Annuel-2024-FR.pdf>

**"And also during the day, the police came to the jungle to try to take out the people from the jungle. When they came, no one was there. Some people had gone to the organizations, to the associations to take some food, or to have a shower, something like that. So when they came they found only one person or two people, and they tried to beat them, you know, they tried to attack them. And one day I found two people, two guys from Sudan, and the police had tied them up and they beat them and they put them in the forest, you know, the place that we go to pee. They put them there, and they left. When I came, I went to pee. So I found these people. So I asked them, "what's happened to you?" They said that, "the police came here and they tried to force us to go out. So we said, 'yes, we are eating and when we finish, we will go.' They say that, 'no, we have to go.' So they started to beat us and do some stuff like that.""**

*- Anonymous, a Sudanese man we met in Calais in July 2025*

## CASE STUDY 1 - VIOLENCE IN LIVING SITES

### 25TH MAY 2025, TESTIMONY RECEIVED BY HRO

"One evening in May, the police arrived at our living site in two cars. One of them was an unmarked car with two police officers without uniforms, the other vehicle was a police van with three police officers (one woman and two men) in uniform.

Some of us were awake. One of us shouted "Hey, police is coming", and four people were able to run away. If they hadn't run away, we are sure, the police would have hit all of us. The people who had escaped were hiding on the street behind the camp, because there is a security camera there, which made them feel safer.

Two people in our group were still sleeping and were woken up by the police entering their tent. The authorities started to hit them with sticks and to pepper spray them. One of the men asked what was happening, as the torchlight came directly in his eyes and he wasn't able to see. One of the men in the group also asked, "Who are you?", and was answered "I am police".

While one of the men was beaten up by the female police officer, she repeatedly asked him for his ID card, for his passport, but the whole time she continued to hit him. She was speaking Arabic without a foreign accent. She shouted "Come back, come back!" to the men who had run away.

One of the men that was beaten up is currently sick, the police hit him too much. He is shivering with fever. He has a big oedema in his leg, so he can't walk. Also, his hand and fingers are hurting a lot. Later in the night that day, he called an ambulance. The ambulance came, but they didn't want to take him, because he didn't have papers, he is from Africa.

In the end, volunteers of an association active in Calais took him to the hospital. In the emergency ward nobody helped him, they just left him there for a long time. He was worried and contacted a friend. He went back to the living site, because nobody helped him. Now he's sick and staying tired in the jungle.

Another man in the group had been pepper sprayed in the eyes, and they are still red and swollen. He was also hit with a truncheon by the police. His leg is hurting.

We had five tents that we were sharing. The police pepper sprayed all of them, including our pillows, mattresses, sleeping bags and several small bags. When we tried to touch them afterwards, we experienced difficulty with breathing, burning on the skin and eyes. We cannot use them anymore. When the police stopped attacking us, they said: "You should look for another place, you can't stay in this place". After that, they left.

Half an hour later, another four police officers in uniform arrived. We stayed on the street behind the jungle, because we thought that maybe the police had come to hit us again. We felt safer because of the camera that is installed there. The police men asked us why we were there and what had happened. We told them about the incident and went inside the tent together, we showed them the spray and everything. But the officers just said "okay" and went away.

We recognized some of the officers that had come to beat us up (including the police woman). They had come before and destroyed two phones, and took a power bank from people in this group, while they were charging their devices next to our camp.

We all have one question: What is the problem, why have the police come to hit us, why are they aggressive with our group? We need to know. The police also told us aggressively "we don't want to see you here again". We are worried that they will come back, maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow.

We don't know where to go. We need to move to another place, all of us want to do that, but we don't know where to go. We are one group. We can't go to another jungle and stay behind another group, nobody likes us, Nobody lets us stay, they would be aggressive against us or fight us with knives. We don't have tents, mattresses or sleeping bags anymore and don't know how to sleep and stay safe at night."



Once again, people are not afforded even the smallest stability during their time at the border, but instead are subject to police abuse at any time of day or night.

This has profound psychological impacts even when police are not present or attacking people, as people are constantly on edge.

## CASE STUDY 2 - VIOLENCE IN LIVING SITES

### 27-28TH JULY 2025, TESTIMONY RECEIVED BY HRO



"I am in Calais with my two children. On the night of July 27 to 28, 2025, around 3 a.m., I was returning to Calais with a group of about 70 people. We were walking along a small road on the outskirts of Calais, pushing the stroller of my young daughter and accompanied by my 5-year-old son.

Around 3:20 a.m., we were stopped by two police cars blocking the road. There was a grey Peugeot police car with four officers parked on the right side of the road we came from, at an intersection, and an unmarked grey car with two officers on our path. These two officers were dressed in dark clothes, wearing short-sleeved polo/t-shirts and an armband on the arm.

While we were walking calmly, tired, the six officers who got out of their cars forbade us from continuing towards Calais. The body cameras on the police were green. Even though we explained that we wanted to go to Calais and not return to the beach, they threatened to spray us with tear gas if we did not turn back.

At that moment, I was at the front of the group with the stroller. I asked them why they were threatening us, telling them I was with my children, showing them the stroller and making gestures with my hands.

One of the police officers then stepped forward and kicked me violently on the left ribs, causing me to fall to the ground. Someone in the group who speaks French told me that when the other officers saw their colleague hit me, they asked him why he did that.

My children began to cry. Still on the ground, I tried to take out my phone to photograph the license plate of the police car, and at that moment, the officer who hit me came back, snatched the phone from my hands, and threw it far into the trees before leaving.

As the police left, the rest of the group tried to take photos of the police but failed. When I managed to get up, I searched with the group for my phone for about 20 minutes, and we finally found it. The screen was cracked.

At that point, I wrote to the Utopia 56 night patrol asking them to call an ambulance because I was in great pain. I shared my location with them. An ambulance was sent, but I had already moved when it arrived.

Most of the group continued to Calais. I stayed with about ten women who helped me walk and bring the stroller and my children to Calais. I had severe pain in my ribs and back and had difficulty breathing. About ten minutes after we resumed walking toward Calais, the unmarked police car with the man who hit me driving returned and followed us from a distance throughout our walk back.

We reached Calais, near the informal living area where I live. Here, I saw that the police officer who hit me was still in the unmarked car, continuing to watch me from afar.

The women went down to the living area, and I fell because of the pain. I then asked Utopia 56, with whom I was in contact the whole time via Google Translate, for help to call an ambulance because I was suffering greatly.

I was taken to the hospital where I was told that the blow from the police officer had fractured two ribs."



Once again the random use of violence to intimidate and destabilise people is clear. This violence is yet another example of the UK and French governments' policy of treating people with hostility and violence to make it impossible for them to stay in northern France or leave to go to the UK. It goes unchallenged by the authorities of either government despite their extensive knowledge of everything that happens in Calais and Dunkirk thanks to a wide network of surveillance; this represents a tacit approval of these human rights abuses.

The French and UK governments must investigate the widespread use of and systemic nature of police violence against people in northern France in order to put an urgent end to it, whilst acknowledging their collective responsibility for these operations. This includes monitoring police activity closely and creating independent reporting mechanisms for police violence.

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.
- The UK and French governments must **pause all security spending at the UK-France border until a statutory inquiry into the increase in violence and deaths since the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty is carried out**. This investigation should seek to establish how UK funding has contributed to the increase in violence, including the rise in power of smugglers in response to heightened security and lack of safe routes.
- The UK and French governments must **create a monitoring framework based in international human rights law** to ensure that any future policy and spending on border security does not contravene human rights.

## ARRESTS, STOP AND SEARCH AND POLICE CUSTODY

People on the move are often arrested randomly by the police, particularly in Calais city centre. For instance, on 21st August 2024 HRO documented the arrest of 15 people by CRS police. Several police officers had turned up at a living site in central Calais. One of them was holding a tear gas canister, and others were searching the men at the living site.

Police racially profile people on the move and carry out random stop and searches. HRO reported the following example of this:

**"Someone sends us messages on the HRO Phone: 'Hello, I am an immigrant. I went into the supermarket. He arrested me, took my bag, searched it and started insulting me. This just happened at the supermarket, at this location [he gives the GPS coordinates of a supermarket in the Calais area].' We ask for more information, and the person replies that it was a police officer who arrested him and took his bag, searched it and 'cursed'/shouted at him. The person was alone, and so was the police officer, but the latter was on the phone. Following this, the person was able to retrieve his belongings and leave the supermarket."**

*- Human Rights Observers*

People on the move are often treated inhumanely when in police custody or administrative detention. For example Bashir, who we met in Calais in September 2025, was arrested by police during an eviction and subjected to inhumane treatment in custody.

**"I was arrested by the police in the jungle when they were taking tents. I tried to get my glasses from my tent when I was arrested but I wasn't allowed. I was held for two days in police custody with no proper food and a very bad smell from the toilet. I have high blood pressure and I told them this and that I had a headache but they didn't take me to hospital. They don't care about my medical needs. They told me that if I was worried about my health I should seek help for it in my own country.**

**I had no access to phone or communication in this time, and wasn't allowed to smoke. I asked for a 10 minute break outside in the fresh air but wasn't allowed this. They told me next time we won't put you here, we will just put you in a toilet. When they released me they told me to go to the UK or any other country but not to stay here. They put the handcuffs on very tight and refused to loosen them or take them off. My only "crime" was not having papers. The Swiss police are gentle but the French police are not. They don't care."**

*- Bashir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

HRO also recorded a testimony of police detention following an eviction which demonstrates racist and homophobic actions from the police:

## TESTIMONY RECEIVED BY HRO



"We were sleeping, and at 6 in the morning the police arrived with two translators, one from Morocco and the other from Yemen. However, they spoke English with us, not Arabic. They said: "get out of your tents, take nothing with you, we just want to talk." The first time, they said it a bit kindly. But there were many of us in this camp, too many tents in the jungle. We came out of our tents. He didn't let me take my pillow, my mattress, my sleeping bag, or my tent.

I spoke with my group. I told them "don't resist the police, don't do anything. If they want to take us to the police station, we are in a European country, we can't say no. That's normal."

A policeman told us "if you don't listen or if you don't go with the police, we can do this another way. Now we are being nice, but we can use force. We are in France, so you must respect the French police."

There were more than 12 black buses, police vans. He told me "okay, we are going to take you to the police station, whether you want or not, you all have to come." He took me. I tried to stay in contact with the English Red Cross, the French Red Cross, and Human Rights Observers. I sent my location and short videos. But a police officer saw me and said "I will break your phone if I see you do that one more time." I couldn't see his face. I stopped using the phone.

When we arrived to the police station, they searched us, they took our phones. I had to hand over my medication. I said "I have asthma and a severe allergy. I take my medication four times a day." I also have a medication called PrEP. It's a pill for homosexuals. We use it everyday against HIV. I do not have HIV; I use it for safety. A police officer asked me "why are you using this? Are you sick?" I replied "no, I am not sick, I am gay. That's why I use it."

But everyone around was listening, it was a big problem for me. Now I cannot return to my camp, too many people are talking about it. We come from Arab countries. It's a different culture, no one understands homosexuality there. Also, they could share it in my country or with my family. I would lose my entire family if they did that.

A police man told me "you can't take your medication with you. Leave it here. If you need it, call us and we will come give it to you." They gave me a translator on the phone. She asked for my date of birth and my nationality. Then a police man gave me more papers, there were more than 12 documents. I asked what these were for. The police officer said "sign, sign!"

I replied that I won't sign if I don't know. He told me "alright, then you will stay here longer, maybe a month. Maybe we will see with Dublin, maybe we will send you back to Germany or another country. We can do that if you want." I signed, but I didn't know what I signed.

Then, they put me in a small room; there were four of us. I asked the police for water, and they told me that the water was automatically provided by a machine, but it wasn't working. We asked for water again. One police officer told us "by the way, tomorrow afternoon you can go out. I asked him "but why not now?" He replied, "you can't ask me that question. Listen to me, if you want to go out. If you want to stay here longer, we will let you go last.""

I didn't ask anything else. At 2PM we were all given food and a cup of water. After half an hour, two people arrived without police uniforms. They said: "you are all going to unlock your phones!" One policeman asked "what is your phone?" I showed them my phone. But I told him: "This is private information, only for me. My documents are with you; if you want you can see my name and everything else." I couldn't express myself and explain about my private data because I was with someone from my camp and my country. The policeman said to me "I'm not interested; you need to unlock your phone now." I gave him the pin code and showed him how to unlock the phone. Then he went into another room for about half an hour.

After that, he came back and brought me in. Other policemen laughed at me. The policemen (about 6 people) all started to laugh, after they saw what my phone was. I have gay apps on it. I also have photos of my boyfriend and another friend, some of which are naked.

The policemen asked me "Why did you come to Europe?" I replied, "I think you all know it by now,, You laugh or smile because you know that I am gay. Your system or you rules in France support all LGBTQ people. That's why I came. And my information, with whom do you share it?" A police officer replied to me "that's none of your business, you should leave now. It's better for you."

I left, I can't go back to the jungle because now more people there know that I am gay. This will create more and more problems with them.

After two days, my boyfriend told me that he found a message in our shared email account, saying that someone unknown had entered our account. I also received this message "Are you ...? Someone is trying to access your email." I think the police shared my information. This email arrived after I left the police station. At the police station, I simply unlocked my phone and gave them my pin code. My password for my email account is secret. I did not give it to the police, I don't know how they could have accessed it."



All of these police interventions contribute to making people's lives violent and difficult at the border. It is no wonder many people wish to leave France after being subjected to this treatment. However, when they attempt to leave France to the UK, they are stopped by the same police forces who have evicted and committed regular violence against them. People cannot stay, but they cannot leave.

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.

# SECTION 4: SUMMARY

## LIFE AT THE BORDER - "YOU CAN'T STAY"

Section 4 has shown how in living sites and anywhere in Calais and Dunkirk, people are subject to unsafe living conditions, systematic police violence through eviction cycles, and random police violence. People feel they 'can't stay' in France, a deliberate state policy of attempted deterrence.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### LIVING CONDITIONS IN NORTHERN FRANCE

- Unsafe living conditions are a deliberate state choice. This includes a total lack of adequate shelter and the failure to meet basic human rights such as food and hygiene provision. Police undermine these rights by sabotaging the work of NGOs, such as by confiscating and damaging water tanks.
- Deliberate hostile design has pushed people's informal living sites further from city centres and the support offered by NGOs. This includes the use of rocks to block people from pitching tents.
- People also suffer significant illness and injury due to unsafe living conditions: medical charity Médecins du Monde report that 88% of treatment they provided in 2023 was a consequence of living conditions.

#### EVICCTIONS AND OTHER STATE VIOLENCE

- Through the policy of 'zero points of fixation,' French police regularly evict informal living sites, confiscating property and creating a sense of instability with devastating psychological consequences.
- Evictions also see the use of other forms of violence such as tear gas, random arrests and flashball bullets.
- The number of evictions increased significantly in Dunkirk in 2025. According to local authorities, this was funded by the UK.
- Random police violence, including physical attacks, is common in Calais and Dunkirk.
- People are unable or unwilling to report police violence for a number of reasons, including the involvement of police in complaints procedures.
- Arrests and police custody are also violent and often involve racism and xenophobia from police.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

#### RECEPTION IN FRANCE

- The UK and French governments must **divert spending on militarisation to provide humanitarian assistance**, with a group convened including experts by experience and NGOs to determine adequate use of this funding.
- The UK and French governments must **collaborate to create and fund a dignified and safe reception for people on the move in northern France**, including shelter, access to food, water and hygiene services, and access to adapted safeguarding support.

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

#### FUNDING AND POLICY

- The UK and French governments must **create a monitoring framework based in international human rights law** to ensure any future policy and spending on border security does not contravene human rights.

#### DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES

- The UK and French governments must **pause all security spending at the UK-France border until a statutory inquiry into the increase in violence and deaths since the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty is carried out**. This investigation should seek to establish how UK funding contributed to the increase in violence, including the rise in power of smugglers in response to heightened security and lack of safe routes.

#### RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

#### ENDING STATE VIOLENCE

- The UK and French governments must **work together to end the 'zero point of fixation' policy** (enacted by widespread violent evictions), including **ending UK funding** for these operations.
- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.

# 5

## CROSSINGS FROM FRANCE TO THE UK - “YOU CAN’T LEAVE”

### 5.a. LORRY CROSSINGS

“I tried 5 times to cross in a truck and failed, but in the end I crossed in a truck. It’s difficult - you had to try and jump in while the truck was already moving - but you have no option. To go in a boat you need a lot of money, but I didn’t have that money so I had to cross in a truck. When you were in the truck you had to hide in a corner. The police dogs would try to smell you. The parking had cameras and a security guard would come if he saw you, but I was lucky and managed to pass to the UK... The jungle I was staying in was very dangerous. I didn’t like it, and that’s why every day I tried to leave. I didn’t like France, it wasn’t a safe place.”

- Raya, who we spoke to in August 2025

Instead of creating safe and accessible routes between France and the UK for people on the move, the UK and French governments have focused on reinforcing securitisation and surveillance of parking areas as well as of the port and Eurotunnel. Investments in fences and walls, police, guard dogs and security personnel have only made attempting the crossing by lorry increasingly dangerous for people on the move. Calais and the surrounding port, tunnel and industrial areas resemble an open prison, featuring an estimated 70km of fences and walls. Crossing by lorry has become more difficult due to this securitisation, and new routes have inevitably been defined by smugglers in response to the constant need of people on the move to reach safety.

Although attempts to cross the Channel by small boat have outnumbered numbers of crossing attempts by lorry since around 2020,<sup>75</sup> attempting passage by lorry remains a common crossing strategy for many - namely those who cannot afford to pay for passage by boat. This group often includes unaccompanied children, leaving some of those who are most vulnerable exposed to violence and risk on the roads.

The Maison Margelle, a welcome house hosting many people who are convalescing after their release from hospital, hosted twelve people who had been injured as a result of road or lorry accidents between May 2024 and April 2025. This is the third largest category of injury for which the house hosted people that year (after those injured and ill due to poor living conditions in camps at the border, and those injured as a result of sea crossing attempts).

**There have been at least three deaths resulting from crossing attempts by lorry in the first nine months of 2025, and at least four in 2024.<sup>76</sup>**



76 - <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/deaths-at-the-calais-border/>

## REINFORCED SECURITISATION OF PARKING AREAS

Reinforced securitisation of parking areas (fences, barbed wire, security dogs, etc) means that these places are both difficult and dangerous to access. The policing of parking areas and other strategic places is widespread and omnipresent. As Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025, described:

**"I've been trying to cross in a truck - the police aren't often violent to us, but they are always there. Sometimes they use tear gas on us."**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

The widespread use of tear gas to deter people from parking areas and to detect people stowed away in lorries is commonly reported.<sup>77</sup> We also heard several reports of the use of (often unmuzzled) security dogs. Rashid, a Sudanese man we spoke to in Calais in July 2025, explained:

**"People go to try and climb in the lorries at night in the parking. When they go inside there, there are dogs, you know, with the security man. The security man, once he sees people in the parking, he lets the dog go to fight the people, to attack the people. I saw many like that at that time, I saw people bleeding... Every night we have one or two people who have experienced something like that, from the dogs."**

*- Rashid, a Sudanese man we met in Calais in July 2025*

The fact that parking areas are increasingly securitised and dangerous leads many people to attempt to jump onto moving lorries (rather than hiding inside them when they are parked, as was previously more feasible), increasing the risk of injury or death.

At the time this research was carried out, several people found themselves in hospital with injuries from either falling off a moving lorry or getting crushed in the space between the head of the lorry and its trailer. Salim, a twenty-two year old Sudanese man, experienced this kind of accident in summer 2024:

**"It was raining that day. I was running, running, running. I jumped up to the lorry, but got stuck between the head and the back of the lorry - they closed on me. I just surrendered in that moment, I prayed to God..."**

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**Half of my body - my legs, were crushed. Only after some minutes I got the power to knock on the wall of the lorry so the driver would stop. He stopped. He was very shocked when he saw my condition."**

*- Salim, who we met in Calais in August 2024*

Salim sustained damage to the pelvis and legs, requiring several operations and 8 months of medical care.

While people tend to be aware that the space between the driver's cabin and the main body of the lorry is one of the most dangerous places to be, and information flyers<sup>78</sup> on this topic are circulated at people's living sites, it is often the only option when trying to board a moving lorry. When we asked Salim if he was aware of the dangers of positioning himself on that part of the lorry, he replied:

**"I knew it was dangerous, but there was no other way. There is no other way to get to the UK. So I jumped up between the front of the lorry and the back anyway... Even by sea it is not safe. Both ways are dangerous, but I chose to go by lorry."**

*- Salim, who we met in Calais in August 2024*

People on the move make rational decisions to make or keep themselves safe. Salim's testimony shows that although people are well aware of the dangers involved in attempting the crossing by lorry or by small boat, they have no other option than to put their lives at risk to try and cross the border in these ways.<sup>79</sup> The fact that the only possible routes are potentially fatal or risk resulting in life-changing injuries emphasises how problematic it is that there are no safe routes.

## LORRY DRIVER VIOLENCE

Lorry driver violence against people seeking to board their vehicle to make the crossing to the UK is not uncommon. This form of violence is exacerbated by the fact that lorry drivers risk fines on the UK side,<sup>80</sup> and/or fines and criminal charges on the French side<sup>81</sup> if found to be carrying an undocumented person across the border, making it something they want to avoid at all costs. Angèle Vettorello from Utopia 56, an organisation which operates an emergency number to support people on the move when they find themselves in danger, described:

78 - <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/brochures-zines-flyers/>

79 - <https://channelcrossings.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/channel-crossings-report-3.pdf>

80 - [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/level-of-penalty-code-of-practice/level-of-penalty-code-of-practice-accessible?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com#part-two--section-32--carrying-clandestine-entrants](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/level-of-penalty-code-of-practice/level-of-penalty-code-of-practice-accessible?utm_source=chatgpt.com#part-two--section-32--carrying-clandestine-entrants)

81 - [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article\\_lc/LEGIARTI000042774521?](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000042774521?)

**"The large majority of people whose calls we receive are unaccompanied minors who are in lorries, and who experience violence from lorry drivers. Sometimes they are removed from the lorry in a violent way, or experience police violence once they leave the lorry."**

- Angèle Vettorello, *Utopia 56*

Feyrouz Lajili, former coordinator of MSF who support unaccompanied minors at the border, described a striking case:

**"Last year there was a young man who was hit by a lorry driver with a piece of iron after the driver found him hiding in his lorry."**

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator

Taher was injured while attempting a crossing by lorry in Calais in 2023, due to the actions of the driver of the lorry he was on. He described:

**"I took the lorry from the jungle going towards the port, but then realized it wasn't going to the port. I was between where the driver is and the big box at the back, so I tried to make noise, to bang on the wall to show the driver that I was there and that I wanted to get off. But the driver just started to drive around and around the roundabout to make me fall off... After I fell I tried to get up, but I realised that my leg was broken, I couldn't walk. Some of my teeth were also broken."**

- Taher, who we met in Calais in December 2024

Taher was in and out of hospital for over a year as a result with a serious leg injury. He needed several operations, including the insertion of metal rods into one of his legs. He also explained how difficult it was for him to access emergency medical care when the accident happened:

**"People went by me but no one helped me... I called an ambulance, they asked me the place I was and I told them 'I don't know the place - if you can give me your WhatsApp number I can send the location.'..."**

...

• • • • •  
**They said, 'okay just like five minutes, I will call you back.' I waited and they never called me back, so I decided to send a message to my friend. He went to the police and they came with an ambulance."**

*- Taher, who we met in Calais in December 2024*



Once again, the root cause of this violence is the lack of safe routes to reach the UK: people have no choice but to take risks, including facing potential violence from lorry drivers, to try and cross the border.

## REFRIGERATED LORRIES

Some people attempt the crossing in refrigerated lorries transporting fresh produce. This can seem like an attractive option because these kinds of lorries tend to be less thoroughly searched at the border as they carry perishable goods.

However, this is also extremely dangerous, and can lead to hypothermia, suffocation and freezing, because most often refrigerated trucks cannot be opened from the inside. Jeanne from the Maison Margelle described how:



**"Once a [Sudanese house guest] came home on his bike, it was the middle of winter. 'Aren't you cold?' I asked him. He told me: 'no, I just cycled 12km, some young guys were stuck in a refrigerated lorry so I went to help them get out.'"**

*- Jeanne, Maison Margelle*



It is not uncommon for this kind of thing to happen. However, it can be particularly challenging for organisations to respond to these situations - if the lorry isn't heading towards the UK but in another direction, the vehicle may be very far from the border and support networks by the time those trapped inside call for help.

Utopia 56, for example, sometimes receives calls from people stuck in refrigerated lorries on their emergency number, after which they try to coordinate with the authorities to have the people rescued.

## DEATHS

It is not uncommon for people attempting the crossing by lorry to die in the process. In 2023, at least seven people are known to have been killed on the roads and motorways of northern France, as well as at least three in 2024 and at least three in 2025 (as of late October). The ways in which they died ranged from being hit by moving vehicles, falling from lorries, and being crushed by cargo inside lorries. Calais Migrant Solidarity document the following deaths in 2023, 2024 and 2025,<sup>82</sup> conveying the violence and risk involved in lorry crossing attempts:

**15 July 2025:** **Saeed Ibrahim Ali Saadon**, a 23-year-old Sudanese man, dies after falling from a lorry in Transmarck.

**13 May 2025:** **Ahmed Hummed Nafi**, an Eritrean man, [dies after being hit by a lorry](#) in Marck.

**27 January 2025:** A young Sudanese man, **Oday (Minnie)**, aged 19, died in the Transmarck area in the Marck near Calais, after being crushed in the trailer of the lorry in which he was travelling to England.

**18 April 2024:** **Fowsul Ameer Abdul Vajith**, a 24-year-old Sri Lankan man, dies after being hit by a vehicle on the Pont-à-Roseaux in Loon-Plage.

**8 April 2024:** **An unknown man** is killed after being hit by a vehicle on the E42 motorway near Spy, on the way to Namur in Belgium.

**4 April 2024:** A **23-year-old Sudanese man** is killed after being hit several times by vehicles on the E40/A18 between Furnes and Oostduinkerke.

**17 November 2023:** Shortly after midnight, a group of around fifteen people were hit by a lorry while walking along the hard shoulder on the A26 motorway near Calais. Two Turkish men, **Ali and Rajb**, were instantly killed. Four other people were injured, one of them seriously.<sup>83</sup> The group had been walking back to their living site in Dunkirk after a shipwreck.

**14 September 2023:** **Jallal Alden Mohamed**, a Sudanese man, dies after being hit by a car on the RN225 between Dunkirk and Lille.

**4 July 2023:** **Yahya**, a Sudanese man, dies on the A16 motorway in Calais after falling from the truck he had climbed onto to travel to the UK.

**July 2023:** **Mohammed Rani**, a Chadian man, was found dead in a lorry in the UK after having attempted to cross to the UK.

**31 May 2023:** **Sami Othman Omar Ibrahim**, a 24-year-old Sudanese man, dies after being hit by a truck in the Transmarck area of Marck, near Calais.

**10 May 2023:** **Ahmed Youssef Adam**, a 30-year-old Sudanese man, dies after being hit by a truck in the Beaumarais area of Calais.

Despite the dangers of lorry crossings, people have continued to attempt to cross in this way, particularly those who cannot afford boat crossings. This is due to the lack of other options for safe passage available to people. As Samir, who applied for the 'in' route of the 'one in, one out' scheme to come to the UK but was rejected for unclear reasons, explained:

**"I just want to come legally, but now my only choice is trucks, trucks or the sea."**

*- Samir, who we met in Calais in September 2025*

This shows that crackdowns on one method or route for border crossing does not put an end to crossing attempts. Instead, it makes them more dangerous, more lethal, while also leading to the emergence of alternative dangerous routes like, in the case of the UK-France border, crossing attempts by small boat.

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

## 5.b. SMALL BOAT CROSSINGS

**"One of the boats that went ahead the day before I went, someone I knew drowned in front of my eyes - it was heartbreaking. When I came, it took 10 hours because the location wasn't correct. It was very dangerous."**

- Selam, who was in Dunkirk for 3 months.

Small boat crossings were rare prior to 2018, but due to increasing securitisation which made first Eurotunnel and then lorry crossings more difficult (a so called 'deflection effect')<sup>84</sup>, they have become increasingly common.<sup>85</sup> Getting in a small inflatable boat to cross the Channel is an inherently dangerous thing to have to do, as the Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world and air and water temperatures are often low. Even successful crossing attempts are traumatic and difficult experiences.

**"There was a mother who crossed to the UK, she spent seven months here, she was pregnant and had three children, three little girls. Then she called me to tell me that she had crossed and she said to me, 'you know, we spent 12 hours at sea, we made it, but we suffered.' For sure, these are journeys that are very dangerous and very traumatic, especially for children, especially for children who understand what is happening."**

- Mariam, Secours Catholique

The small inflatable boats themselves are unsuited to the journeys, and engines often fail, leaving people at risk. Boats also collapse due to being overloaded, including from floors breaking. This is an inevitable consequence of people having no choice but to make the crossing on totally unsuitable vessels. Therefore, before any other factors are involved, these boats are unseaworthy and people are at risk.

**"I was in Germany for 2 years but I was asked to leave. I had no other choice but to come here. I tried to cross in a boat and we were on board for 6 hours, but then the engine stopped."**

- Abdul, who we met in Calais in September 2025

However, in a marked increase in state violence since 2023, the UK government has worked with the French government to increase the levels of policing on the beaches to try and

deter crossings. This means that alongside an already risky journey, police actions add chaos and danger to crossing attempts. The result of this UK policy and funding has been increased panic, violence, injury and deaths.

Utopia 56 recorded 1603 people affected by police violence during crossing attempts in just 7 months in 2025 (March-September). This represents 229 people per month on average, meaning an average of over 7 people per day affected. In this section we explore the variety of ways in which police violence puts people at danger during boat crossing attempts.



## OVERCROWDING

Since the latter half of 2023, interceptions of small boats before they reach beaches in northern France and police operations to intercept and disable boats on the beaches have increased. Alarm Phone have analysed how this has developed since the March 2023 Joint Leaders' Declaration, which paved the way for greatly increased police operations to try and prevent small boat crossings.<sup>86</sup>

According to Alarm Phone, the two main consequences of this policy change are twofold. Firstly, fewer dinghies are reaching the French coast, which means that when they do set off they are more likely to be overcrowded, and that each embarkation involves higher numbers of people, making departures increasingly chaotic.<sup>87</sup> This has continued as boats are increasingly confiscated throughout Europe when being transported to the Channel.<sup>88</sup>

Secondly, the police have increased their attacks on boats as they launch, meaning departures are more panicked and unstable, often leading to boats being launched before they are fully inflated.<sup>89</sup>

Both of these factors have continued to put people in danger during crossing attempts, and as Alarm Phone shows this leads to increased deaths in the Channel, often near to the beach and in the presence of the police.<sup>90</sup> This is a direct result of joint UK-France policy, as

86 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration>

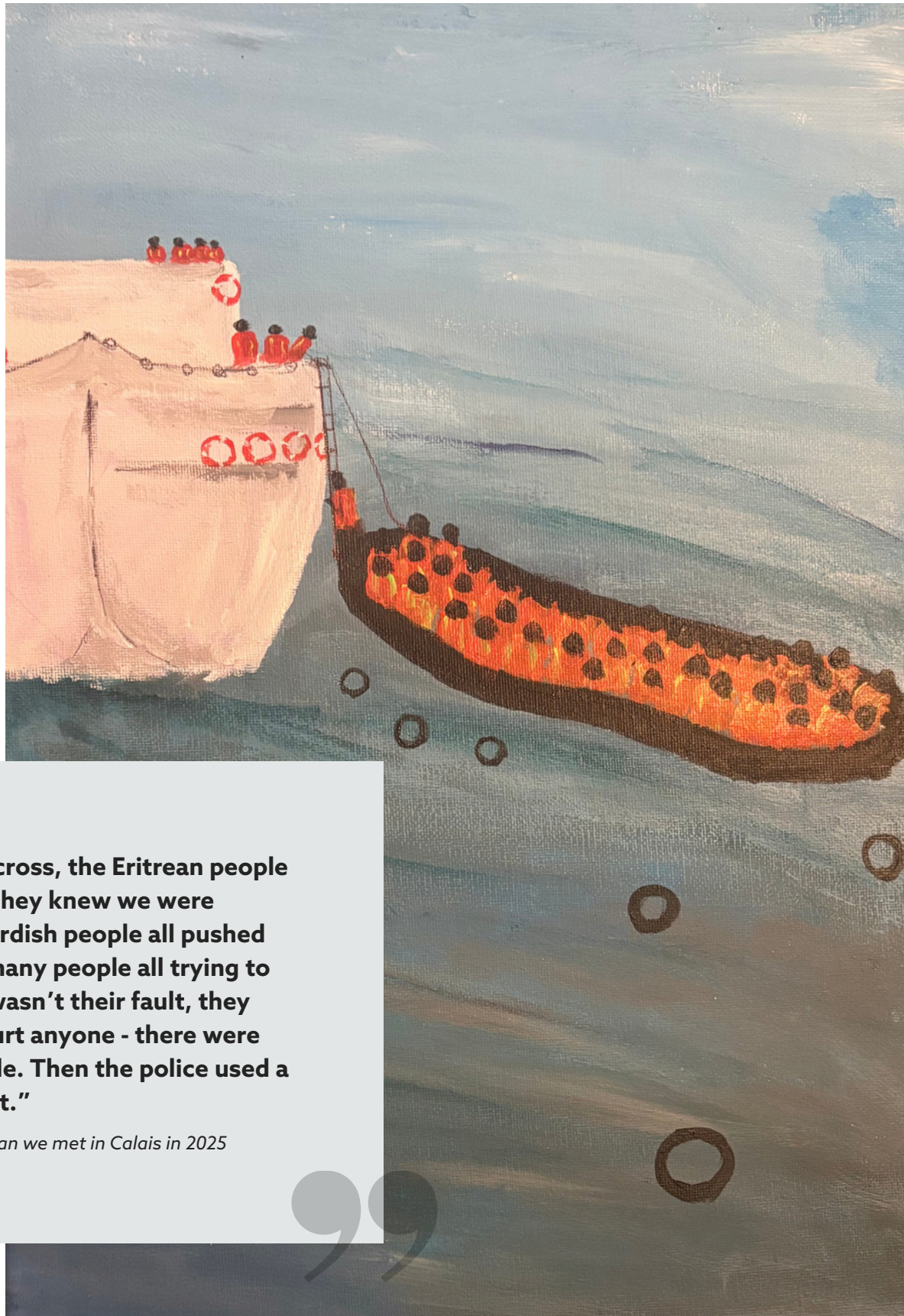
87 - [https://www.project-play.org/\\_files/ugd/6fd156\\_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23f5e5d77d.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/_files/ugd/6fd156_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23f5e5d77d.pdf);

[https://assets.ctfassets.net/ksb78y40v1oe/3jvKzZzUYHvTdfM0ciCVDB/27748f9eddf6caff842c39b05dc2d83a/RLF\\_Bilan\\_2024\\_vdef\\_page\\_a%C3%8C\\_page\\_1.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/ksb78y40v1oe/3jvKzZzUYHvTdfM0ciCVDB/27748f9eddf6caff842c39b05dc2d83a/RLF_Bilan_2024_vdef_page_a%C3%8C_page_1.pdf)

88 - For example, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce8360r88jdo>

89, 90 - [https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/01/28/the-deadly-consequences-of-the-new-deal-to-stop-the-boats/?post\\_type=release\\_type=post](https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/01/28/the-deadly-consequences-of-the-new-deal-to-stop-the-boats/?post_type=release_type=post)

continued since the March 2023 Joint Leaders Declaration where an additional sum of around £476 million was pledged from the UK government to the French government,<sup>91</sup> and underpinned by ever increasing UK funding.



**"When we tried to cross, the Eritrean people helped us because they knew we were Eritrean. But the Kurdish people all pushed us - there were so many people all trying to get on the boat. It wasn't their fault, they weren't trying to hurt anyone - there were just too many people. Then the police used a knife to cut our boat."**

*- Abeba, an Eritrean woman we met in Calais in 2025*

The reduction in boats and subsequent overcrowding, and increase in violence and chaos on French beaches, have led to deaths by crushing. In 2024 and 2025, multiple people were killed by crushing, including men, women and children as young as 4 months old.

**23rd April 2024** - **Sara el Ashimi**, an Iraqi girl aged 7; **Abdo Alnor Zacharia**, from Sudan; **Semet Cagritekin**, a Turkish man aged 22; **Rakesh Kumar**, an Indian man aged 44; **Zhilan Mohamed Amin**, an Iraqi woman aged 25 were all crushed to death during a crossing attempt.

**28th July 2024** - **Dina Al Shammari**, a Kuwaiti-Iraqi woman aged 21, was crushed to death during a crossing attempt.

**5th October 2024** - **Minh Nhat Tran**, a Vietnamese man, **Hareg Geto**, and an **unidentified man** were crushed to death during a crossing attempt.

**17th October 2024** - **Maryam Bahez**, a 4 month old baby from Iraqi Kurdistan, died after being crushed during a crossing attempt.

**9th September 2025** - **two Vietnamese people** and a **16 year old child** from Egypt were crushed to death during a crossing attempt.<sup>92</sup>

Women and children are often placed in the middle of the boat in an attempt to keep them safe from falling out during crossings, but this places them at disproportionate risk of being crushed during overcrowded crossings. Overcrowding also further compromises the already unseaworthy boats, making shipwreck more likely.

**"Under the current conditions for crossing, with the constraints of the wall and barbed wire stretching 70-75 km along all the borders, people are pushed to cross by sea. Women often say that they are in danger and that the makeshift boats, small boats, are often overloaded. Last year, we even saw a young girl who died, suffocated. This year, too, children have died, not drowned but suffocated, because they all climb into a boat where there are 120 people. And so, unfortunately, the smallest and most fragile are crushed."**

*- Mariam, Secours Catholique*

Intercepting boats has been a key objective of joint UK and French policy, and UK funding has focused on surveillance technologies to attempt to achieve this. However, the clear consequence has been increased overcrowding, placing people in danger.

**According to the UK government's own data, the average number of persons per small boat has steadily increased since 2018 from 7 to 54 in the year ending March 2025, with a small boat recorded to be carrying at least 125 people in September 2025.<sup>93</sup>**

Angela Eagle, who was UK Minister for Border Security and Asylum at the time, admitted that the increased loss of life in 2024 was because *"more pressure is being put on the gangs, the boats are being overloaded and there is more anarchy on the beaches in France"*.<sup>94</sup>

This 'anarchy' is because of the chaos caused by police operations and people's attempts to escape police interventions. When police are present during a crossing, people panic and boarding the boat becomes more dangerous. As Angela Eagle says, this is a key factor in increased numbers of deaths. Haddish, a woman who spent 5 weeks in Dunkirk, explains:

**"Most people die from drowning because when they see French police they will run to the boat. In between that [the shore and the boat] most people die because they don't want to be caught by French police. When people are trying to board small boats, the police come and people run in fear from the police."**

- Haddish, who spent 5 weeks in Dunkirk

Flore Judet from L'Auberge des Migrants explains how this links to overcrowding:

**"[In 2024 many people] died not from drowning but from being crushed. And that's the effect of overcrowding. This effect of overcrowding, due to the large number of people but also to the police presence, created stress, and people ended up climbing on top of each other. It is also due to the fight against smuggling networks, which is overfunded by France and the United Kingdom and actually has the effect of reducing the number of boats and therefore overloading the boats because in fact, it only treats the symptoms of a problem...the real problem is that people do not have access to safe routes and are therefore forced to turn to smuggling networks, and the governments are only going to deal with the issue of smugglers and will never deal with the issue of safe routes."**

- Flore Judet, l'Auberge des Migrants

93 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/small-boat-arrivals-and-the-impact-of-crossing-conditions/small-boat-arrivals-and-the-impact-of-crossing-conditions#:~:text=According%20to%20statistics%20reported%20in,in%20the%20following%202%20years.>

94 - <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-11-06/debates/77B1E99D-C873-49E1-9EB9-B6F57C0B939C/SmallBoatCrossings>

Angèle Vettorello, from Utopia 56, explains how this leads to an increase in fatalities not only by crushing, but also by drowning less than 300m from the shore:

**"Because there are more police on the beaches...departures are happening in situations of really intense stress...as a result there are more people in the boats...and moments of tension and situations where there can be accidents near to the coast...we've seen in the last two years that 65 people have died less than 300m from the beach, so it has an impact on the fatalities."**<sup>95</sup>

- Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56

People working for and involved with associations at the northern French border have observed an increase in instances of intercommunity violence in recent years. Much of this violence is related to the overcrowding of boats, to chaotic departure moments on beaches (which frequently happen under high police pressure), and to people being determined to cross the border at any cost and taking great risks to do so, for example by trying to board boats they have not paid for a spot on.

Overcrowding has been the cause of injury and death of many people on the move, in particular since 2024. Angèle Vettorello from Utopia 56 described:

**"So the attempt yesterday where people died, there were 110 people on the boat. It's crazy. We had never heard anything like it before. And the number of times we've asked people who were at the beach 'What happened? Was there a problem with the boat?' and they've said, 'no, there were too many people so I didn't manage to get on.' We're almost systematically hearing about violence in moments of departure, violence between people."**

- Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56

Anna, a Utopia 56 coordinator, described:

**"There are cases where people are going to get on the boat and there's a rush to get on - there are too many people essentially, for the boat. There's an issue with overcrowding, they [the organisers] tell more people than necessary to come. And it really creates tensions."**

- Anna, Utopia 56

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95 - For more information on the number of deaths 300m from the coast, see <https://wedodata.fr/productions/lesjours-morts-calais/>

Chaotic departure moments due to high police presence and frequent police and intercommunity violence on the beaches also exacerbates intercommunity violence that happens at the living sites. The same person explained:

**"Afterwards, the violence moves to the city center. So if it was an issue between two communities, well, very often it will just continue at the living sites, under the bridge, you see. It's the same in Dunkirk. And the problem is that often, if a violent incident happens, usually it won't be the only one. There will be a counterattack, and then another counterattack. And that can last several days."**

*- Anna, Utopia 56*

Fatima, an unaccompanied child from Somalia, described the fear this violence and frustration around failed passage attempts creates, in this case in a small forest base camp relatively near the departure points:

**"Some people will try to cross the Channel, but then they are caught and sent back. We were in the middle of a jungle [forest] where you have to go before you go to the beach - maybe half an hour from the sea. Around five men who were sent from the boat were all shouting and screaming when they came back [to the forest] later, wet and angry. They burned what was under the trees, causing a lot of fear. People were scared and hiding, and some people tried to put water on the fire. We moved away and then the smugglers put out the fire because they didn't want the police to see it."**

*- Fatima, an unaccompanied child who was at the border in April 2025*

Furthermore, cases of people trying to rush onto boats without having paid for a spot onboard has grown more common as opportunities for passage have grown more scarce. This happens in the moment of departure and can be violent, exacerbating panic situations. As Anna, a Utopia 56 coordinator, observed:

**"We're getting more and more testimonies about violence between groups of different nationalities. A huge amount. I think it's because some groups try to intercept boats, maybe to take the equipment."**

*- Anna, Utopia 56*

K, a woman from Kuwait, explained:

**"I stayed out all night because there was a chance to cross to go to Britannia... I was sitting there in the dunes hidden with other girls and couldn't move from how cold I was. There was not even a fire... Then, at some point, it [the boat] did arrive. We entered the sea and suddenly a person came running at us with a knife and threatened us. He then went into the balon [boat] and took it to go to England alone. I was desperate, I started crying because a great opportunity has been lost on us."**

*- K, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research*

The more pressure exerted by states and state agents during crossing attempts, the more chaotic and dangerous these events become. In response to this chaos, violence and hostility, people may respond in a violent way due to fear, frustration, anger or desperation.

The lack of safe routes to the UK means that people are forced to engage in these crossings, and are at more risk of intercommunity violence during and after them, particularly when police interventions exacerbate tension.

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

## FAMILY SEPARATIONS

The overcrowding of boats and chaotic, panic-inducing situations that result from policies of increased securitisation and violent police tactics on northern French beaches in moments of attempted departure can have the brutal consequence of separating families.

Over the past few years there have been several cases of parents becoming separated from their children, with some family members making the crossing to the UK while others are left behind in France. This has included lone children as young as 4. Mariam, a long-term employee at the Secours Catholique, explained:

**"When we give people information, we tell them, 'if you see that there are a lot of people, don't get into the boat, be careful not to get separated from your children,' because we have several times witnessed families getting separated... We try to tell families to stay together. We also try to tell them that if they see that there are too many people, they shouldn't attempt the crossing so as not to put their children and their family in danger. But it's very difficult. It's very difficult."**

*- Mariam, Secours Catholique*

In December 2022, an Eritrean woman became separated from her three children. Due to lengthy legal proceedings and an almost total absence of process by which she could cross the Channel safely, she was forced to cross herself by small boat to reunite with them.<sup>96</sup> Mariam remembers meeting this mother, and described the shock and distress she was in after it happened:

**"I remember, two years ago, a case where the children crossed without their mother. She put the children in the boat and the people on the boat saw the police coming, they started the motor and the mother, she wanted to catch the boat, but she couldn't swim and saw her three children go. This mother was horrified because on the same evening this happened, someone tried to rape her. And I remember one Monday when I arrived here, she was standing in front of the door and I spoke to her, but she didn't say anything. She was frozen... But at one point, she told us what had happened. So we managed, along with other associations and partners in England to reestablish some connections, to tell the children in England that she was here. It took the mother two months to cross and join her children, who had already been taken into foster care. These are the kinds of things that people experience."**

*- Mariam, Secours Catholique*

While in this case it was possible for associations in Calais to make contact with the children who arrived alone in the UK, in other cases this was more difficult. A restoring family links officer with the Red Cross explained how in some cases, it can be very challenging for these family members to find each other again or to reconnect, especially in cases where children get left behind and are very young, don't know their parents' phone number and are travelling without a mobile phone to be reached on - and in a context where phones are often lost or broken at sea.

In July 2024, two Kurdish parents were separated from their two sons, nine and six years old, while attempting to board a boat together.<sup>97</sup> The separation happened in the context of a panicked and overcrowded boarding of the boat, during which a fight broke out and the mother fell overboard, the father then following her into the water, trying to rescue her. Before they could reboard, the boat departed without them but still carrying their children.

While in some cases these separations are mediated, in other cases they happen discreetly. A man hosted with his son at the Maison Margelle in October 2024 was in deep distress after he was separated from his son during a crossing attempt. While the son successfully made the crossing after his father helped him onto the boat, the father had not managed to get on the boat after him. He continued attempting the crossing for several days after the separation, eventually succeeding at joining his son in the UK.

A recent report by Project Play emphasises how children fear being separated from their families during crossing attempts, well aware that this is a real danger in these moments.<sup>98</sup>

The distress caused to families and especially to children as a result of needing to resort to dangerous boat crossings emphasises the urgent need for safe routes. Family separations and the resulting danger to children are avoidable, but the wellbeing of children and the risks they face are entirely overlooked by state border deterrence strategies, which rather seek to create chaos and inflict unsafety on people on the move. The ill-will of the French and UK governments are underlined by the fact that even when families are separated across the Channel, no safe routes are provided for parents and children to be reunited.

## POLICE INTERVENTIONS

The "intense stress" created by police comes from a range of tactics, including the use of tear gas, knives to slash boats, flashballs, and other random acts of police violence.



**"They will...[take a] gun, fire the boat and the people will...run inside the water, some run outside the water, some of them run over there, and there will be instability"**

*- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025*

## TEAR GAS

Police use of tear gas is common to attempt to disperse those trying to cross in small boats. It is used frequently and indiscriminately, where children are present and without due cause. It is banned as a weapon of war, yet deemed 'appropriate' for use by officers to prevent people from crossing to safety.<sup>99</sup>

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97 - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/23/family-separated-channel-crossing-may-not-reunite-uk-court-rules>

98 - [https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156\\_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23fbe5d77d.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/files/ugd/6fd156_e368d04ae8ed45289c642a23fbe5d77d.pdf)

99 - <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2020-06-05/tear-gas-banned-war-time-ban-its-domestic-use>



**"Then, suddenly police arrived and didn't want us to reach the sea, so they threw gas at us [teargas], we couldn't breathe and then they broke two boats with a gun."**

*- A, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research*

**"We were surprised by the police, and they started throwing tear gas at us. They took the boat and hit it with a knife, and he started firing gas at us, and we started running, and we were in fear."**

*- I, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research*



Tear gas can have serious respiratory impacts as well as damaging people's eyes. Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, explains:



**"We also see lots of ophthalmological pathologies...linked to the use of tear gas. We also see a lot of patients who ask for eye drops who have red eyes etc. This is linked to the use of tear gas by law enforcement officers , whether that's during evictions of living sites or on the beach during crossing attempts."**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*



**Police often use tear gas on groups including families and children as young as 2 months old, as reported by Project Play.<sup>100</sup>**

This is despite the fact that tear gas disproportionately impacts children: their respiratory systems are smaller and less developed so more affected by the gas, and canisters are usually set off on the ground, so children are closer to them and receive a stronger dose.<sup>101</sup>



**"One of the most recurrent things that people still mention to me now and they mentioned a lot last year is the fact that when police tear gas the people on the coastline, they do not care if there is a one month old, two month old, like a child they just don't care and this is something that is ... quite recurrent."**



• • • • •  
**...And then last year, the family of a child who lost a daughter already in the water when they went on another try, called me in the middle of the night and they had a one month old baby,...and they were desperate because the police tear gassed them and the child was suffering so much and couldn't open their eyes anymore."**

- Gloria Ciaccio, Channel Info Project

**"One woman we hosted tried to board a boat. She had to wade into the water up to her neck. She had her 1 year old baby on her back. She told us she thought he would drown from how much he was coughing, but it was from tear gas."**

- Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova welcome house

Not only is tear gas dangerous to individual's health, the tear gas canisters can also react with fuel in the engines of small boats to create fires and explosions.<sup>102</sup> This has not been a one-off event, but a repeated and increasing problem, meaning police must be aware of this risk when using tear gas on the beaches.

**"With the tear gas launchers, the canisters can go inside the boat and the oil or the fuel. And so the boat is set on fire and people are burnt... it's been happening much more since the start of this year [2025]."**

- Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56.

In some cases, the use of tear gas has created a panic that has led to deaths in crush injuries. For example, 7 year old Sara was among 5 people who died in an overcrowded boat in April 2024.

**"Her parents noted the fact that she [and others attempting the crossing] had been sprayed with tear gas by the police. A video taken by the BBC, who were filming, confirms this."**

- Refugee Women's Centre.<sup>103</sup>

102 - For example, [https://x.com/Utopia\\_56/status/1837478424799064153](https://x.com/Utopia_56/status/1837478424799064153)  
103 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-68904413>

In additional footage seen by HFRN, and through casework provided by HFRN to a survivor of this incident, extensive use of tear gas by police is evident. The footage shows CRS and the notorious SPI4G (Section de Protection et d'Intervention 4ème génération), a violent "anti terror unit" present in some CRS companies. Officers can be seen charging towards the water's edge, throwing tear gas towards those in the water and surrounding the boat.

A chaotic, aggressive situation surrounds those seeking to cross the Channel, and it is our analysis that this situation would have impacted those on the boats' ability to disembark it. Violence, tear gas and an aggressive arrest shown in the footage may have rendered people unable to leave the boat even if there was no room onboard.

## SLASHING BOATS

Another common police tactic is slashing boats with knives so they are deflated and can no longer set off.<sup>104</sup>

**"They [police] have like a knife, okay? They will run into the water and they just dismiss the boat. And sometimes also they use some rifle like [thing] to destroy the boat"**

- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025

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**"I tried to cross three times. The first and second times, the police cut the boat to deflate it. We ran away to escape from the police."**

- Moussa, who crossed to the UK in early 2025

Once again, this tactic was used whether vulnerable individuals were present or not.

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**"We were leaving for England and the police saw that we got into the boat and they slashed it with a knife. I don't know why they wanted to do that. They know we are going to England, they are putting us in danger because they slash the boats, we were with children and women in the heat without any shelter. They are supposed to help us. But there they put us in danger"**

- Testimony collected by HRO

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This tactic has been used increasingly in recent months, usually on the beach.

**"We have seen a rise in the number of testimonies we receive of people whose boat has been slashed on the edge of the water. And that's alongside the increase of people crossing by boat."**

- Angèle Vettorello, *Utopia 56*.

However, police have also used this tactic when boats were already in the water. In July 2025, this was documented when BBC journalists filmed police slashing a boat in the water.<sup>105</sup>

A spokesperson for the UK Prime Minister responded by describing the footage as *"a significant moment and we welcome this action... We want to see tougher action taken, that's precisely the focus of our work, it is the outcome of that close work [between the UK and France] that you've seen."*<sup>106</sup> This shows that the UK government is prepared to condone dangerous and violent police interventions which put lives at risk, when they think it is popular politically to do so.

**However, there is clear evidence that this was happening prior to July 2025, contrary to the claims of many media outlets that this was a first time occurrence.<sup>107</sup>**

**"When the BBC released footage of police slashing a boat in the water, and using teargas on families, it was reported as being exceptional. However, we know this kind of thing happens all the time."**

- Joseph Givens, *Maria Skobtsova welcome house*

For instance, Human Rights Observers recorded the following incident on 13th July 2024:

**"A group of 65 people, including women and 6 children (8-17 years old) were going to cross the Channel. A person reports that the police punctured their boat with a knife while the boat was in the water (1 meter deep). There were still around 10 people on board the boat when the police stabbed it. The boat was pulled to shore after it was punctured."**

- Human Rights Observers

Furthermore, these incidents can, and have, led to serious harm of individuals.

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105 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/videos/c1jwzzx5wr3o>

106 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yggjxjlplo>

107 - For instance, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/07/04/french-police-puncture-migrant-boats-yvette-cooper/>

**"There are also testimonies of violence...where the police cut the boat whilst the boat is in the water...and there are moments where that has serious consequences for a person. Notably, last October [2024] when there was someone who was in a coma for a really long time."**

- Angèle Vettorello, *Utopia 56*

As Angèle went on to describe, this was against French government guidelines:

**"It's a case of law enforcement officers acting outside of any clear logical or legal framework and it happened all winter [2024-2025]"**.

- Angèle Vettorello, *Utopia 56*

Current French and international maritime laws outlaw any intervention with vessels in the water, unless the boat has 3 or less people in it.<sup>108</sup>

However, in January 2025, then-UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announced she had "persuaded" the French government to intervene (which is not limited to slashing boats, but appears set to include this) when boats are in the water up to 300m from the coast. At the time of writing, this change has not had final approval from the French government, but if it does go ahead then people will be placed in even greater danger during small boat launches.<sup>109</sup>

**65**  
**people killed**  
**< 300m from the coast\***

\*In 2024, data from *Utopia 56*

As Angèle from *Utopia 56* explained, 65 people died less than 300m from the coast in 2024. This demonstrates that this radius is far from safe. Police interventions in the water will increase the chaos of embarcations as people will panic whilst trying to board boats, putting them at risk of drowning and increasing the risk of overcrowding and crush injuries. If boats are destroyed or sunk whilst in the water people will be at great risk of drowning and other injury.

In October 2025 Martin Hewitt, UK Border Security commander, told the Home Affairs Committee that the French were working on ensuring that officers would be 'protected' from accountability in these circumstances, because: **"Any activity in the water is incredibly dangerous and we're all familiar with the examples previously where there's been numbers of fatalities"**.<sup>110</sup> This admission of danger to life from one of the UK's leading government officials working on the border begs the question of how the UK can continue to condone such a policy. Yet again, UK policy and funding looks set to treat people with growing violence and put them in even more danger.

108 - For international law on rescue at sea, see <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4aa664bd9.pdf>

109 - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/04/france-begin-intercepting-small-boats-asylum-uk-home-office>

110 - At 10:19:20 <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/2c00962a-3d62-4605-b5a7-381476133f59?in=10:19:20>

## RECOMMENDATION

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The UK and French governments must **commit to not implementing violent police actions which will endanger life**, such as pullbacks or interventions in the water.

In July 2025, a boat continued to the UK after being slashed by French gendarmes.<sup>111</sup> This demonstrates that people will attempt to continue to the UK even in such circumstances. Increasing how disabled boats are will not necessarily stop these journeys, but will certainly increase the level of danger people are subjected to.

### OTHER FORMS OF POLICE VIOLENCE

Police often use other, more random forms of violence to attempt to stop people from crossing to the UK.

One of the other non-lethal weapons used by French police are "flashballs", a kind of large rubber bullet. Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, described the devastating impacts this had on a young person during a crossing attempt:

**"In January 2024, we supported a young man from Afghanistan for several weeks. He had three fingers broken by a flashball on the beach. Afterwards he had to undergo an operation and then have physiotherapy sessions so he could keep the use of his fingers."**

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator

Being chased by police often leads to injury and psychological harm. For instance, Refugee Women's Centre described how:

**"A woman reported that on 15th August 2024, whilst she was on the beach to try and cross to England she was attacked by the police who pushed her over. She fell onto her stomach and since then had pain in her stomach. She is two and half months pregnant."**

- Refugee Women's Centre

Police chasing people who were trying to cross was also a cause of injury and fear. Project Play observed that:

**"In June 2024, we met two children with injured legs following crossing attempts, one of whom was having to use crutches. In October 2024, we met an 8-year-old with scratches on her face. She explained she got them whilst running through the woods after a failed crossing attempt, being chased by either police or intermediaries."**<sup>112</sup>

- Project Play

Former MSF coordinator Feyrouz Lajili also explains:

**"[A significant proportion of patients are] people who will also twist their ankles on the beaches because they are running, because there has been police violence and they can leave quickly, so they will fall, twist their ankles on the sand, etc."**

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator

Separately, S, a woman interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research, said:

**"The day after a try all your body is hurting. You have wounds from the bushes."**

- S, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research

Footage published online by Utopia 56 in August 2025 shows police chasing a man and his young son on the beach, brandishing a large weapon. The police shout at them in English: "Go away! Go away!". The child tries to drag his father away from the police, shouting "Baba zou", which translates as "quickly dad". Utopia 56 wrote:

**"From the minister of the Interior, the justification stays the same again and again: police operations aim to save lives...however, all the factual elements come to show the same thing: their goal is not to save lives, but instead to instill fear and maintain the border at any cost."**<sup>113</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK and French governments must **end violent police interceptions of crossing attempts**, whether by small boat or lorry. **Both governments must end their funding** of these operations.

## **POLITICAL PRESSURE CAUSING INCREASINGLY VIOLENT INTERVENTIONS**

Police officers know that their interventions put people in danger. In June 2025, Sky News published an article in which they interviewed French police officers:

**"On the shore, police officers stood by, watching. When I asked why no attempt was made to intervene, one officer said: 'It's for their safety. There are children there. We're not going to throw grenades at them. It's inhumane. But it's sad.'"**<sup>114</sup>

- French police interviewed by Sky News

When officers choose to use violent intervention, they do so knowing the danger they could put people in.

However, police forces continue to do so in order to carry out the policies determined by the French and UK governments. That police actions are influenced not only by policy, but also by political context, was demonstrated in June 2025. Referring to images from police interventions on June 13th 2025, which showed police entering the water above their waist to stop a crossing attempt, Angèle Vettorello from Utopia 56 explains:

**"They were using pepper spray, they were hitting people with batons in the water, they were pushing people in the water. There were women, children, and vulnerable people inside the boat and that's something we often observe. But this was the first time we've seen it this serious.**

**It was more a form of political communication in that case, since the week before, French police officers were photographed doing nothing on the beach whilst a taxi boat was collecting people from the beach. Afterwards these images were really well circulated in the British media.**

**There were lots of articles where the press and British citizens were saying things like, 'We are giving you loads of money. We are paying the French police to stop the boats. And then the French are just taking photos and doing nothing.'**

**And so after [Yvette] Cooper replied saying we're in the process of changing this doctrine with the French government...**

• • • • •

...And during the next opportunity people had to cross, that's when this police operation happened with lots and lots of media on the beach, at least 2 different media outlets. Usually when media are present, the police 'restrain' themselves to legal actions, which they are allowed to do.

So for me, this was entirely political communication and the French government who were angry against the French law enforcement officers and who said OK, let's show the English we're doing our job, even if it's outside the law...and yesterday we received a video the same where a boat is cut in the water...and the police come into the water with their gas in their hands." <sup>115</sup>

- Angèle Vettorello, *Utopia 56*

It was just days after we interviewed Angèle that the BBC filmed footage of French police slashing a boat in the water.<sup>116</sup> This seemed to confirm her theory that the approach of the police had switched from trying to hide illegal practices which put people in danger, to seizing opportunities to mediatise them.

This shows how far the Overton window around small boat crossings has shifted in recent years: the French government would rather be seen by the British public to be abandoning laws which seek to keep people safe and take violent action that endangers people, than be seen as inactive. Meanwhile, the UK government will encourage any violent action from French police as long as it seems to serve their end of stopping small boat crossings.

## MULTIPLE CROSSING ATTEMPTS

"Some people I knew tried to cross 9 or 10 times. They couldn't cross before because police made a hole in the boat"

- Mahmoud, an unaccompanied child who crossed to the UK in March 2025

As several testimonies above describe, due to police interventions to stop boat crossings people have to attempt to cross multiple times before successfully reaching the UK. Project Play documented the increase in time children have spent at the border, showing the ways this has changed in recent years.<sup>117</sup>

Given the fact each crossing attempt is an inherently dangerous and potentially traumatising event, the more of them people experience the greater the levels of violence they

<sup>115</sup> - One of the news stories of French police failing to prevent crossings Angèle referenced <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767555/French-police-watch-migrant-families-children-Channel-UK.html>

<sup>116</sup> - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5ygjjxjlplo>

<sup>117</sup> - <https://www.project-play.org/we-want-to-be-safe>

experience. As the UK government continues to increase its funding for French policing of the border, including surveillance technologies, this trend looks set to continue to increase thanks to UK policy. Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56 coordinator, explains:

**"People no longer cross in one go, [often] they try more than 10 times, and so more than 10 times they are violently confronted by the police, so more than 10 times they can be exposed to police violence and therefore direct physical damage. There's an accumulation of the impact on their physical health and especially their emotional and mental health in the long term, because these are people who are subject to moments of super intense stress, not just once or twice like before, but now over several days or weeks when they stay hidden in the dunes for a week trying to cross, and they go through this every day."**

- Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56

## LONGER JOURNEYS AND TAXIBOATS

**"When I was trying to get in the boat, the water was up to my neck."**

- Haddish

Intermediaries who organise boat crossings to the UK adapt their plans to try and avoid police interventions, which also increases the danger people are in. This is most evident in the shift from organised lorry crossings to boat crossings in the years post the erection of numerous walls and fences and the estimated £35.96 million money paid to Eurotunnel in 2015.<sup>118</sup> These attempts to adapt also occur within boat crossings.

One tactic used to try and avoid police intervention is the use of "taxiboats", which set off from the beach with just a small number of people in them to steer the boat, after which they pick people up from the water. This means people have to wade or swim through cold water to reach the boat. This is one of the factors that led to 65 people dying less than 300m from the coast in 2024. Yvette Cooper's proposal to introduce interventions in the water up to 300m from the shore, discussed above, is an attempt to stop people being able to access taxi boats.

However, even before this policy has been implemented, its announcement has had consequences for people crossing the Channel. In June 2025, MSF reported to us that they

had heard people were wading out increasingly far from the shore to reach taxiboats. This seemed to be in response to the potential threat of police intervention. This shows that smugglers' tactics put people in increased danger in response to government policy, rather than in isolation.

Journeys now leave further and further from Calais beaches, due to the high police presence there. This means the distance people need to travel to the UK is further, resulting in longer journeys and more chance of something going wrong.



**"People are starting to cross from as far as Normandy to try and avoid police interventions."**

*- Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova House*

**"People are crossing from more and more dangerous places, for example crossing from Boulogne where the journey to the UK is 3 times longer than if you go from Calais."**

*- Volunteer, Maria Skobtsova House*



Due to the restrictions which currently prevent French police from intervening when more than three people are in a boat in water, some crossing attempts also start on canals inland and then continue out to sea to avoid police intervention.

However, canals are deep and dangerous, and have resulted in a number of fatalities.

**In 2024 at least 4 people drowned in canals whilst attempting to board a boat Jumaa Alhassan, aged 27,<sup>119</sup> Roula Al Mayali, aged 7,<sup>120</sup> Nasreddine Hassan Ahmed, aged 26,<sup>121</sup> and an unnamed man in his 40s.<sup>122</sup>**

Jamal tried to cross the Channel in March 2025. He was shocked by the behaviour of the police during this attempt, and shared his experiences with HFRN:

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119 - <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/hautes-de-france/nord-0/le-corps-d-un-migrant-de-27-ans-retrouve-dans-le-chenal-de-l-aa-a-grand-fort-philippe-2942073.html>

120 - [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/03/03/tentative-de-traversee-de-la-manche-une-enfant-de-7-ans-meurt-dans-le-nauffrage-d-une-embarcation-a-watten\\_6219860\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/03/03/tentative-de-traversee-de-la-manche-une-enfant-de-7-ans-meurt-dans-le-nauffrage-d-une-embarcation-a-watten_6219860_3224.html)

121 - <https://www.premar-manche.gouv.fr/communiqués-presse/decès-d-une-personne-en-mer-a-bord-d-une-embarcation-de-migrants-au-large-de-calais-62>

122 - <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/dunkerque-un-migrant-retrouve-mort-samedi-soir-dans-le-canal-de-bourbourg-3431849>

## JAMAL'S TESTIMONY

“When I tried to cross, we were chased by the police running after us. People were trying to be in a boat, just running away, and some people were caught by the police. There were children on their own aged 16, 17, they were afraid, there were waves of water in front of them and at the back.

The police were trying to catch them. So that's very scary. The boat was inside the water so I had to walk until all of my leg was inside the water and then try to get in the boat. If the boat was just on the beach outside of the water, the police would cut it.

The police used electric sticks and gas that stung like chilli. Someone fell down when they used the gas because he has asthma. I saw him fall down and the people were around that man trying to carry him and help him, but not the police.

The boat was inside the water like three, four metres from the beach. Anyone who knew how to swim had a go. The police let the people gather together, like many people, 40 or so, and then just came suddenly to them to try to catch them.

So anyone who knew how to swim just said I'm just going to keep going and continue to go to the boat because they were worried about the police doing gas or using the electric sticks or anything. So people who come with a boat always get worried and scared when they see the police.

I felt like I was in between life and death. Just facing being in a boat and facing death, it was very scary. And the second thing is I felt that I was going to die.

There were people who drowned in the water and passed away, it was dangerous. Some people didn't know how to swim. Women and children there didn't even know what the sea looked like, it was their first time seeing it.

The waves were like three metres and the police were running after us. The waves were in front of us and we were trying to get in the boat. The situation was really difficult. I saw people drown in front of my eyes.”

## INJURIES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE FROM CROSSING ATTEMPTS

The dangerous nature of these crossing attempts can cause serious injury. A commonly experienced injury is suffering severe burns after engine fuel mixes with sea water, as explained by Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator:

**"We also see injuries just from the crossing attempts themselves...burns from the mixture of sea water and fuel which spills into the boat, causing burns on feet and legs. We have had several people who have arrived [at MSF services] with these types of lesions, and who we have treated".**

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator

A\* described her experience of being burned in this way:

**"The gas of the motor as well started to come inside, and that burnt a lot of people's legs, including mine. Everyone was shouting in fear and because they were getting hurt. I cried so much when I took them off and I saw all that blood coming from my feet. It didn't stop. I couldn't walk by myself. My feet were very swollen, and I could feel them pulsating. I couldn't even put them on the floor because it hurt so much."**

- A\*, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research

As Florencia Doglioli explains:

**"A... didn't get burned because of the police, but because the policies in Europe left them no choice but to take dangerous risks.**

**These policies create a hostile environment where people are forced to put their lives on the line just to try to reach safety."**

- Florencia Doglioli

**"We had a lot of guests in the house with chemical burns at the end of last year, especially a lot of Somali women. The level of burns was severe, we're talking situations where women couldn't even get out of bed. One woman had her bandages reapplied incorrectly, and a nurse from MSF had to peel them off with iodine and then reapply them correctly. It was incredibly painful. One young woman - she was 16 or 17 - became addicted to the painkillers she'd been given to manage pain from her burns. We had to hide the painkillers in the basement to stop her taking them."**

*- Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova House*

Not only are these burns themselves incredibly serious, but the medical risks associated with such injuries are further compounded by the unsanitary living conditions people return to after failed crossing attempts. A doctor who had worked at the Calais hospital and PASS clinic described:

**"After someone's been burned, there's the question of healing... We need to see patients every day or every other day to make sure the burn wound doesn't get infected. The pain of changing the bandages is just awful... and the healing process is compromised because people will have to step on their burn wound, say, if it's on their foot, and it will macerate in their shoes... it's logistically complicated.**

**If a local comes in with a burn we know they'll get work leave and be able to lie down for a week. But here [with people on the move], we know that a few hours later they'll be back out in the water or walking kilometers and kilometers in bad shoes."**

*- Former doctor at the PASS clinic*

People also suffer significant psychological impacts after shipwrecks. Project Play documents how children suffer in the aftermath of shipwrecks and failed crossing attempts, including where people died.

**After a deadly shipwreck in September 2024 which killed 8 people, we worked with an 11-year-old who described how she knew one young man who had been killed. She explained that she knew he called his mother every day, and that now she felt sad for his mother who would be missing him. A 13-year-old at the same play session also spoke a lot about a man who died in the same shipwreck.<sup>123</sup>**

*- Project Play*

Of course, adults are also deeply affected by shipwrecks. The coordinator of one welcome house near Dunkirk described one such case that they had witnessed:

**"So, we took in people who had been shipwrecked, alongside whom, or during whose shipwreck, there had been victims, people who had died. I remember a man in his thirties, a computer engineer, and two of his friends with whom he had left, with whom he had made the whole journey, died in a shipwreck. He was saved at the last minute. They found him in the middle of the sea. He ended up in hospital, he had inhaled water and developed a lung infection, etc., and it was after a few days in hospital that he arrived here. He was grieving and suffering mentally, so he was depressed and had panic attacks."**

*- Coordinator, welcome house near Dunkirk*

Médecins sans Frontières report that the psychological impact of shipwrecks is widespread and one of the major mental health concerns they see at the border. Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator, explains:

**"And in terms of psychological consultations, we also see many conditions related to living conditions. For a long time, this has been one of the main reasons for consultation. We call these stressors. A stressor is an event that makes you want to see a psychologist, or rather, that makes you realize you need to see one. And according to some months in 2024, the number one stressor was living conditions in Calais. Depending on the month, this also became number one, and it changed from number one to number two, which is witnessing a potentially traumatic event, mainly shipwrecks..."**

...We took care of a lot of people after shipwrecks, so it's easy to see that out of 99 new patients last year at the psychologist's office, our psychologist Chloé saw 30 people who wanted to see a psychologist following a potentially traumatic event, which in this case mainly meant shipwrecks, not exclusively, but for the most part shipwrecks.

You see, at the end of the year, incidents involving a loved one came in at number one, followed by shipwrecks at number two. And thirdly, living conditions. Whereas during the first part of the year, living conditions were number one. And with the arrival of summer and the increase in the number of deaths, etc., we took on a lot of people connected with shipwrecks.

And in fact, when we say "incident involving a loved one," we mean people who saw one of their loved ones die in a shipwreck. And in fact, since we can choose several stressors, we can choose three per patient. In general, you see... If it's someone who has lost a loved one in a shipwreck, we check off "incident involving a loved one" and "shipwreck." That's why they are also in first place."

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator



The psychological damage done to those who survive shipwrecks is an inevitable consequence of the violence that UK and French policies of police intervention engender. As long as these violent operations continue and escalate, they will lead to deaths and dangerous situations which will have traumatic impacts on those who witness them and lose loved ones.

It is clear that police violence has made boat crossings much more dangerous. As we have examined throughout this chapter, this is a direct result of UK policy and funding. It is clear that the UK government must assume responsibility and work with the French government to defund and end the existence of this violence, perpetrated by state agents. However, it is also vital to consider the extent to which even the existence of small boat crossings is a result of UK policy. A lack of safe routes means people have no choice but to cross irregularly, and the securitisation of the border has meant that small boat crossings are one of the few viable methods.

Although the UK and French governments attempt day in, day out to ensure that people can't leave (as well as doing their best to stop them from staying), people continue to cross the border against all the odds. The only difference is the level of risk they are exposed to.

**"People always need to pass from France to the UK. If you just close that system, there will be a mess...For example, you lose life."**

- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

## 5.c. SMUGGLING AND ITS VIOLENT IMPACT

**"I felt insecure and unsafe."**

- Osman, an unaccompanied 15 year old who experienced smuggler violence during a crossing attempt.

The more the UK and French governments securitise the border, the more people must rely on smuggling networks to cross it. As emphasised elsewhere in this report, reinforced securitisation does not operate as a deterrent but instead makes it increasingly dangerous for people to cross the border. This danger comes not only from policing that increases the risks people take to cross, but also because, with no safe routes available, people must rely on smugglers to make the crossing.

**"Within the context of the Channel borderzone [smugglers] were also understood as the holders of vital information, the means to facilitate a crossing, and business people providing a service"**

- Channel Crossings Report (2025).<sup>124</sup>

While these services are in demand from people who want to cross the border, interactions with smugglers can often be fearsome and violent, particularly in a context where smugglers are under pressure from the authorities.

It is easy for the UK and French governments to blame smugglers for the injury and death of people seeking to cross the border, but these networks are in fact the product of government policy. If safe routes were available, these injuries and deaths would be far less likely to happen, as smuggled journeys would not be required.

This section details the violence of smugglers and their intermediaries at the border, the secondary impacts of smuggling on intercommunity tension, and the impact of police anti-smuggling operations on people on the move more generally. As Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime, an anti-organised crime thinktank, explain in their 2024 report 'Small Boats, Big Business':

**"All international experience and evidence shows... that securitized and punitive measures are unlikely to achieve the desired goals [of dismantling organised crime networks]... the higher the obstacle, the more people will turn to smugglers who, in turn, will charge more for riskier approaches to infiltrate their clients into the UK... The key... is to delink migration from the demand for smugglers' services... providing safe... routes... would significantly reduce the number of possible clients for voracious smuggling networks."**<sup>125</sup>

- Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

124 - Page 29, <https://channelcrossings.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/channel-crossings-report-3.pdf>

125 - Page 24, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Small-boats-big-business-The-industrialization-of-cross-channel-migrant-smuggling-GI-TOC.Feb-2024.pdf>

## VIOLENCE FROM SMUGGLERS AND THEIR INTERMEDIARIES

Smugglers often use violence to coerce people into dangerous crossing attempts. This is in part due to high police presence on the beaches, as described in [section 5b](#), meaning smugglers are keen to ensure the boarding of boats happens as quickly as possible to evade police attention. Osman, an unaccompanied 15 year old who arrived in the UK in early 2025, described how:

**"I was in the jungle with my friends for around 4 days. People came over to us and told us to come to the sea, and once we got there, they told us to get into the boat. I said "No", and they started to hit me, then lifted me and forced me into the boat. I felt insecure and unsafe."**

*- Osman, an unaccompanied 15 year old who experienced smuggler violence during a crossing attempt.*

Several organisations have observed similar practices. For example, Angèle Vettorello from Utopia 56 explained:

**"People experience exploitative power relations, especially minors. It's often minors who are exposed to thefts and violence in their camps, and who aren't necessarily free and willing in their decision to try and cross - they're pushed to get on a boat for example, or to drive it, or to do other things... For us, this is caused by state abandonment that allows these kinds of situations to arise, for this kind of domination to take hold."**

*- Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56*

As Angèle mentions, a recurring instance of smuggler violence arises around people being coerced or forced into driving a boat. Driving the boat can be a risk that a person takes on because they do not have the resources to pay for a boat crossing, or it can be something a person is forced to do.

We met Munir from Sudan in August 2024, in his hospital room in Calais. He was severely burned as a result of a crossing attempt, and explained how he and his peers were forced at gunpoint to board an unseaworthy boat. The captain had also been forced to drive the boat by smugglers:

**"There was a small hole in the boat from the beginning. We tried to tell the people who managed the boat that we couldn't go because of the hole, but they said, 'no, it's OK, it's not a big problem'... The driver said he didn't want to take so many people because the boat has a hole - he didn't want to be responsible for all of these people. But they said we had to go, there's no other way. They forced the captain. They threatened us all with violence - these people, they have guns. There are many people who have been shot before. So the captain tried to go anyway."**

*- Munir, who we met in August 2024 in Calais*

This kind of testimony is particularly important to take into account at a time when, as Captain Support document,<sup>126</sup> people accused of driving small boats are increasingly being criminalised as smugglers in France, and being called responsible for any deaths that occur during the crossing.<sup>127</sup>

This is also the case in the UK.<sup>128</sup> In 2024 alone, 68 people were sentenced to prison (in most cases 9 to 12 months) for piloting a boat from France to England.<sup>129</sup> In cases where there has been loss of life, sentences are much longer. A striking example is the case of Ibrahima Bah, who is serving a nine-and-a-half year prison sentence in the UK for manslaughter and facilitating a breach of UK immigration law.<sup>130</sup> Bah steered a small boat from France to the UK in December 2022 in exchange for his passage and under duress from smugglers.<sup>131</sup> The boat broke apart during the crossing, and at least four people died, for which he has been held responsible.

Violence also occurs when people try to board boats without having paid for the crossing, which often leads to smuggler violence against these individuals. Some people try to board boats without paying for the crossing because, as described elsewhere in this report, reinforced securitisation means that options such as crossing by lorry or trying to cross the Channel by boat without relying on smugglers' services have grown increasingly difficult and dangerous. Securitisation means people on the move increasingly need to rely on smugglers' services, but not everyone has the resources to pay for the crossing. This leads to people trying to board the boat without paying, exacerbating the risk of both overcrowding and violence. Feyrouz Lajili, former coordinator at MSF working predominantly with unaccompanied children, described:

**"Last year and in summer 2024, several young people told us about moments of violence on the beaches in moments of departure, namely because the smugglers have started putting their intermediaries..."**

126 - <https://captainsupport.net/blog/setting-the-scene-how-france-is-criminalising-those-who-facilitate-passage-along-its-northern-coastline-introduction-au-contexte-comment-la-france-criminalise-les-faciliteurs-de-passag/>

127 - <https://captainsupport.net/blog/15-months-of-pre-trial-detention-in-order-to-search-for-the-smugglers-ahmads-trial-15-mois-de-detention-provisoire-pour-pouvoir-rechercher-les-passeurs/>

128 - <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/No%20such%20thing%20as%20justice%20here%20for%20publication.pdf>

129 - Captain Support flyer, 2025

130 - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/mar/12/ibrahima-bah-teenage-asylum-seeker-manslaughter>

131 - <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/61702/uk-court-refuses-appeal-by-migrant-boat-pilot>

...on the beaches to stop people who haven't paid from getting on the boats. They mostly spoke to us about people with sticks who would beat them and stop them from getting on the boats."

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator

Women are not spared violence in moments of crossing either. As Fatima, an age disputed client of HFRN, described:

"it was a very loaded boat and we were very squashed and it was scary. When I was getting onto the boat, the man responsible beat me hard - he beat all the girls specifically."

- Fatima, an unaccompanied child who crossed to the UK in April 2025

In Dunkirk, smuggler violence and specifically gun violence are particularly widespread. Injury and deaths caused by gun violence are frequent. As of mid-October, at least four people had been shot dead in and around the Loon-Plage camp in 2025, with many more injured. A Médecins du Monde employee described:

"What's complicated in Dunkirk is that the mafia is very present. And very very much out in the open. It's... omnipresent, basically. A climate of tension and violence has really been accentuated over the past two or three years. Before, we knew that there could be gunshots etcetera at night, but because it was happening at night we didn't really know about it unless people told us about it during the day. But over the past two years or so, it also happens during the day. We regularly hear gun shots, and sometimes we even see weapons."

- Employee, Médecins du Monde

This is a particularly unsettling and violent situation in which to live. Joseph Givens, host at the Maria Skobtsova House, described:

"One woman who stayed with us had a 16 year old son with autism. Before they came here, they stayed in Grande Synthe. The son told people to be quiet at one point and a gun was held to his head."

- Joseph Givens, Maria Skobtsova House

Sohrab, an age disputed client of HFRN, who we spoke to in the UK, described their time in northern France as very frightening:

**"When I was in Dunkirk, when I was sleeping I was very scared... Where I was staying in the forest in a tent, there was a man in the area with a gun threatening me in English that if I sit here he will shoot me. He never touched me or physically abused me but only verbally and showing me his gun. Sometimes people would look at me in a bad way and swear at me. I also witnessed many people being killed."**

*- Sohrab, age disputed client of HFRN*

Indeed, they witnessed a Sudanese man being beaten and killed by smugglers.

A medical NGO coordinator described the impossibility of gauging the scale of gun violence [especially in Dunkirk]:

**"We see bullet injuries very, very often, but we don't always hear about it when it happens. Sometimes we'll just happen to cross paths with someone at the hospital, who's leaving after having had their bullet wounds treated..."**

She also spoke of a sense of lawlessness in the camp that is exacerbated by police response to the violence:

**"...so there are random gunshots, and sometimes the police doesn't even come. When we call them, they don't always come... Sometimes when they do come for gunshots, they get out of their car, show themselves a bit, and then leave again saying that, well, they haven't found the shooter. Then again, we've heard informally from some police officers and people close to them that it freaks them out to go into the camp. They know there are kalashnikovs in there, which doesn't make them want to go and get them."**

*- Coordinator, medical NGO*

This reported fear of the camp even on behalf of the police is unsurprising considering the scale of the violence at hand, and yet it also emphasises the context of lawlessness to which people on the move, uninvolved in these networks but simply seeking passage to the UK, are exposed.

## SECONDARY CONSEQUENCES OF SMUGGLING: POLICE ANTI-SMUGGLING OPERATIONS

**"I can't differentiate if it's just people or smugglers or who it is."**

- Jamal, who lived in Dunkirk in March 2025

The above quote shows that it is difficult for anyone to distinguish who is involved in organised crime. This ambiguity is exploited to criminalise people when they cross to the UK, but also police operations within France.

The police often carry out intensive and violent operations to try and find people they think are key members of smuggling networks. However these operations often have an impact on people who are not involved in organised crime.

Dehab, who spent two months in Calais, describes how she was caught up in one of these operations:

**"When we went to the beach from Dunkirk one group of smugglers had an argument with other smugglers who were trying to hijack their boat. They were fighting, one got away and called the police. When the police came, they had helicopters and drones. We were held for 2 days - girls had to kneel apart from the men. The police were trying to 'save us' from them. It was like a movie - I've been in Sudan and everywhere on my journey but I never thought I would see this in France. For 2 days while we were there, almost 3 days, we had nothing to eat or drink. We asked for this from the police but they weren't able to provide anything. They told us 'no, we have to check everything first.' Then the police took us far from the jungle and just left us there. On the way to the boats, the smugglers made us throw out the little food we had, just some crackers and snacks, so that's why we had nothing for 3 days."**

- Dehab, who spent two months in Calais

This doesn't just happen during crossing attempts, but also in people's living sites. HRO received testimony about such an operation, based on which they wrote up the following summary. The police involved in the operation were described as wearing a Union Jack on their uniform alongside the French flag.

## TESTIMONY RECEIVED BY HRO

“On Monday, June 23, at 5 a.m., six people were reportedly arrested in a violent raid. Two people from Afghanistan, who live in the area and witnessed the arrest, said they were shocked by the violence of the operation.

At 5 a.m., the police convoy parked around the camp, blocking the exits for those living there. Around 50 police officers reportedly arrived at the camp, dressed in black, their faces hidden, armed with tasers and guns.

They reportedly woke people up by shouting, shaking, and tearing at the tents where they were sleeping. They allegedly grabbed them by the hair to pull them out, asked them to line up and kneel with their hands behind their backs. Weapons were reportedly pointed at people who had barely woken up, leaving a mark on one person's forehead.

According to witnesses, this arrest appeared to be targeted. They were looking for specific individuals to arrest, using photographs. They checked the men in the line one by one to see if they matched the portraits of the individuals they were looking for. They arrested some of the people, six in total according to witnesses.

An article in Nord Littoral reports the arrest of seven people in Calais and the Ile de France region on the same day by the Police aux Frontières (Border Police).”

The spectacular nature of this raid and its violence convey how beyond seeking to identify and arrest criminals, these operations are designed to instill fear in people on the move more generally.

Although the UK and French states often describe their determination to police ‘smugglers’ and ‘gangs’ as being in the interest of protecting people on the move from them, this event during which people are raided in their living spaces while they are asleep, brutalised, lined up and threatened with weapons, reflect how people on the move are dehumanised and criminalised as a broad group. There is insufficient differentiation between those involved in smuggling and those who are victims of smugglers’ actions. Instead, people are damaged by these police operations regardless of whether they are smugglers or not.

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.

The UK and French governments continually use the violence of smuggling networks to justify increased securitisation of the border. However, **smuggling networks exist almost exclusively because of UK and French government policy**. People need to seek asylum in the UK, and when that is only possible via smugglers, people have no choice but to put their trust, money and lives in the hands of whoever can help them cross.

Smuggling has always been a feature of the border, but it has become harder and harder to cross without relying on smugglers as the border has become more securitised. The violence used by smugglers and their intermediaries around crossings has also increased as police interventions have become more frequent and intense. Higher levels of police presence means crossings take place under much higher pressure, increasing the violence between those organising crossings and those relying on crossings. Smugglers are more likely to lash out in violence when police are present and intervening heavily.

The only way to stop people relying on, and therefore being subjected to violence from, smugglers is to create safe routes for all who need them. This will make the smugglers' business model unviable and mean that there is no reason for smugglers to be violent.

By allowing smuggling networks to decide who is and isn't allowed to cross, the UK and French governments hand over the fundamental human right of access to asylum to these organised crime networks. Their actions have allowed smuggling networks to flourish, and we believe this must be investigated further to prevent an increase of violence.

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **pause all security spending at the UK-France border until a statutory inquiry into the increase in violence and deaths since the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty is carried out**. This investigation should seek to establish how UK funding contributed to the increase in violence, including the rise in power of smugglers in response to heightened security and lack of safe routes.

## 5.d. POLICE NON-ASSISTANCE AND STATE INDIFFERENCE TO DEATH AND DISAPPEARANCE

**"The police don't protect everyone in need."**

- Jamal, who lived in Dunkirk in March 2025

Although many incidents in the Channel are addressed effectively by both French and UK search and rescue, there are also frequent reports of French police inaction during situations of distress at the border. When people are reported missing, the police sometimes fail to intervene to find those who have died. People who have been shipwrecked also report the slow action of the authorities to enact rescue, sometimes resulting in the deaths of those involved.

### POLICE INACTION

Police inaction is a frequent occurrence in living sites as well as in the Channel. Jamal, who lived in an informal living site in Dunkirk in March 2025, explains:

**"People had a fight and shot at each other with guns and knives. The police saw all of this and didn't get involved. They just waited and watched. Instead of stopping them and trying to protect everyone and keep everyone safe, they just let them do that and then came and took them away afterwards. If we tried to take a video or photos they stopped us because they didn't want people to know about it. Police come and scare people - sometimes with dogs, to make people fight. Police should provide safety for all the people, but because they are refugees, they neglect us. I wonder if they are just here to protect European or French people, or if they are here to protect anyone in need? So, I feel very sorry to see that happening. The police don't protect everyone in need."**

- Jamal, who lived in an informal living site in Dunkirk in March 2025

This lack of action when people are in danger also extends to crossing attempts. People often report that police did not take action when asked for help. For example, Refugee Women's Centre received a testimony from two sisters about an incident on 19th June 2024:

**"We arrived at the beach around 5 or 6 in the morning. There were police officers on the beach, one woman and three men. We got on the boat, but after it started moving, my sister and I were pushed into the water. The police saw us but did nothing. We were washed back to the shore by the waves. There was a mother and her daughter calling for help to the police. No one answered them, no one came to their aid. Once we arrived on the beach, none of the police officers asked us how we were, we were not given any survival blankets or basic necessities. So we had to leave on our own, despite the very traumatic situation."**

- Refugee Women's Centre

The case of **Jumaa al-Hasan** also demonstrates the fatal risks of police inaction during crossing attempts. On the night of 2nd-3rd March 2024, Jumaa and his friends were attempting to cross by joining a boat that had travelled up the canal to Gravelines. Police officers surrounded the group as they attempted to cross. Jumaa had climbed down from the riverbank to try and get into the boat, but couldn't reach the boat. As he tried to climb back up the police began to spray him with tear gas and he threw himself into the water to try and escape. Despite people clearly and repeatedly raising the alarm to the police, police officers did nothing to help Jumaa. Nasser, who was on the boat, explained:

**"They were looking at the boat, not at the person who was drowning"**

- Nasser, who was on the boat with Jumaa

Later on the boat got into difficulty and emergency services were called, but they did not try and look for Jumaa upstream despite multiple requests for them to do so. Jumaa's friends continued to tell the police they needed to look for him, and Utopia 56 also contacted the emergency services but were told everyone who was missing had been recovered (this was not true).

In the following days, despite continued attempts from Jumaa's friends and family to get the authorities to search for his body, Jumaa remained missing. It was only on March 19th, 16 days after Jumaa fell into the canal, that his body was found by a local resident.<sup>132</sup>

Jumaa's case shows how police operations to try and prevent crossings can cause fatalities, as fear of the police and the physical effects of tear gas both pushed him into the water. The incidents that followed demonstrate the French authorities' disregard for people reported as missing by their friends or families, both in the immediate aftermath when reaction times are vital, and in the days and weeks following a disappearance. Whether in death or disappearance, people on the move are afforded no dignity by the authorities, who fail to treat them as human beings whose lives are important.

**RECOMMENDATION**

**TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.

## MISSING PEOPLE

Despite low numbers of people reported as missing after incidents in the Channel, the real figures are much higher. Flore Judet, from L'Auberge de Migrants, explains:

**"People are only presumed missing, for example by the prefecture or the maritime prefecture, if they see bodies disappear. So they don't rely at all on the statements of the people on the boat, and this happens a lot on boats because that's where you're most likely to lose bodies. On land it's easier to find bodies, but at sea... the maritime prefecture will talk about one or two bodies going missing from a particular shipwreck,, but otherwise, these people are completely ignored. Friends of the missing and the bereaved will probably report missing persons, but this has never actually led to an official search.**

**In fact, it will happen when people from associations or supporting the bereaved meet shipwreck witnesses or relatives who are looking for someone. Even if they are in touch with the authorities, the missing do not match any bodies that have been recovered. What we know is that apart from when the prefecture itself sees the bodies disappear, there are no parallel searches carried out.**

**So these are people who fall, in quotation marks, into complete oblivion, and it's really important for the people left behind to have the body or some certainty. It's about having something tangible, either you have some kind of hope that remains, or you create despair once again. Between 2020 and 2024, we're talking about 46 missing people."**

*- Flore Judet, L'Auberge de Migrants*

The figure Flore refers to is evidently not one published by the authorities on either side of the Channel. Instead, it is the number reached after research by Maïa Courtois, Maël Galisson

and Simon Mauvieux, published in Mediapart.<sup>133</sup> They detail the attempts of friends and family to find their loved ones after crossing attempts, from young men who saw their friend disappear under the waves and never reemerge again, to an uncle in London who lost contact with his nephew in Calais and hasn't been able to find him since. They also explain how families can be separated during crossing attempts, particularly in the wake of intense police interventions.

When we meet Munir in hospital in August 2024, he describes his experience of losing a friend during a crossing attempt, and being unable to persuade the authorities to intervene:

**"When the helicopter arrived, someone landed from the helicopter and saved me. He swam and brought me to the group with all the people in the rescue boat. The helicopter took the families. Once we were on the boat, I asked about my friend. I said, 'where is Abdo? I lost my friend.' The rescue people said 'we have already found two dead people, but we don't know anything about your friend.' So my friends tried to speak to the rescue people, but they said they didn't have information about our friend. They said we would see about this later. I was in a lot of pain. . . .**

**"People went by me but no one helped me... I called an ambulance, they asked me the place I was and I told them 'I don't know the place - if you can give me your WhatsApp number.' After we arrived back at the port, they drove me to the emergency. My friends are well. They tried to ask the police, they told the police about Abdo. But they said they only found two Afghan guys and that there was no one from Sudan. They tried to ask the police again but couldn't connect with them. So Abdo's cousin is trying to speak to the police and different organisations to understand what has happened.**

**The police said maybe they will go back to the area where it happened, but it all happened many days ago now. I hope to find my lost friend Abdo I am sure he's dead, but I hope that they find his body. The guy who swam to try and save him was sure he was dead. Because he tried to save us all, and first he tried to save Abdo to try and put him on the piece of the boat that wasn't broken. It was just a small piece. He wanted to go to Abdo but the waves were too much and he couldn't reach him."**

*- Munir, who we met in Calais in August 2024*

The sense of helplessness that Munir harbours in prompting any action to search for his friend is jarring, and he is well aware of the importance that search operations be carried out fast. Indeed many bodies sink or are carried away by sea currents, with body parts of people known to have died in the Channel washing up as far afield as Texel island in the Netherlands<sup>134</sup> and the south coast of Norway.<sup>135</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The UK and French governments must **commit to searching for missing people**, creating more capacity through increased funding and planning where needed.

## RESCUE RESPONSE UNDER PRESSURE

Section 5c described how departures from beaches are heavily policed. This has led smugglers to adjust their strategy, often sending several boats out at the same time to ensure that at least some make it past the police. This however also means that search and rescue teams may be quickly overwhelmed, needing to respond to several distress situations at the same time. It emphasizes the correlation between increased policing and the risk of death. People have been left in sinking boats or even in the water for hours at a time.

S, a woman who participated in Florencia Doglioli's research, describes her experience of a shipwreck:

**"We were in the middle of the sea, there were too many people on the boat, around 70-80 people, and the engine broke and we couldn't go any further. We had to call them and send them our coordinates so that they could come get us and bring us back to France. It took them a while to come. We stayed in the water for maybe 2 or 3 hours."**

- S\*, a woman who lived in a safe house in Calais in 2025, interviewed in Florencia Doglioli's research

Aram had a similar experience:

**"The first time, it was a total failure. We were told that the guy steering the boat was a professional, but he wasn't. He couldn't even start the engine. But eventually someone else helped and we got into the water..."**

134 - <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/060625/dans-la-manche-des-morts-sans-identite-des-familles-sans-reponses>

135 - <https://www.dagbladet.no/spesial/vatdraktmysteriet/eng/>

**...but then we just realized there was quite a big hole at the bottom of the boat. We were all attached to each other holding hands, trying to stay on the boat, trying to call the French rescue team. They could not find us, we stayed four hours in the water with the fear of death close to us at any moment. Eventually they found us and we were taken back to France."**

- Aram, who crossed to the UK in December 2024



Luckily in these incidents no lives were lost, but on 9th September 2025 slow search and rescue response seemed to contribute to the deaths of three people. Mustafa was on the boat and recounted what happened:

## MUSTAFA'S TESTIMONY



"What happened to us on September 9th, we were about 125 people on a boat that only carried 70 people and we were exposed to drowning and we might have died at that moment, but the coastguard came at the last possible moment, but they were an hour and a half late in the water and there were three people calling them and saying please try to help us and they arrived an hour and a half late. The French government and the coastguard came to rescue us, they came late and we could see them 100 metres away.

This boat can carry 60 or 70 people, but there were more than 125 people on it and they [smugglers] put our lives at risk. I felt like I was falling short while the ship was sinking. There was a large French ship and we called them more than ten times and they were saying 'we will come now, we will come now'. They could see us 100 metres away and we could see them too.

But the second problem is that the French Coast Guard had a large rescue ship next to us and it came too late. An hour and a half after we called them to rescue us they came. I felt that there was negligence on the part of the French government. We called them and they left us for an hour and a half struggling with death, and the waves were extremely terrifying.

The waves pushed us 100 meters and we returned again, even more strongly from the pressure of the high waves. A small French police boat was rescuing only 8 people at a time, they rescued us over the course of an hour. But I thank God that he gave us another life.



There are two sides that are responsible, the governments and the smugglers should not risk people's lives. For example, sometimes the boat can only carry 60 people and they say it can carry 80 people.

I saw death, I don't want to go to Britain, I want to go back but I am waiting to take money from the smuggler. I spent four years in Germany and I had claimed asylum there, but they refused my application three times and deported me. That's why I came to France.

I couldn't return to Germany as they would remove me to my home country and I have a problem there. I spent 4 years in Germany with no job, no documents, and I didn't have a life there. I can either return to Germany or look for another European country, but I do not want to go to Britain because I saw death on that boat in the water, and I thank God for giving me a new life."

Mustafa's experience suggests that search and rescue efforts or capacity were not sufficient for the operation required of them. For instance, any boat larger than the small police boats which were only able to rescue 8 people at a time would have been unable to rescue people directly from the dinghy, but because of the large number of people on the dinghy, this was too slow.

As Mustafa says, this is the fault of both the government and the smugglers. The actions of the UK and French governments have led to the overloading of boats yet they have not scaled up search and rescue resources sufficiently to meet the increased demand. They continue to focus their efforts and finances on securitisation and trying to prevent crossings (through deterrence and criminalisation), with no suggestion that action will be taken to prevent the increasing numbers of people dying at the border.

Through the work HFRN has conducted with people subject to criminal charges under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, it is clear that surveillance technology is prioritised for use in criminalisation and securitisation as opposed to for use in protecting life.<sup>136</sup> Militarisation takes precedent over saving lives and preventing death.

Meanwhile smugglers overload boats, putting people's lives in danger. However, the only reason smugglers are able to do this is that people have no alternative, safe routes to seeking asylum in the UK. In Mustafa's case, as for many people, the UK is not necessarily a first choice but can become the only option after being rejected by the asylum system in another European country, subsequently facing removal to one's country of origin.

Although Mustafa no longer wants to attempt the dangerous crossing, his other options also do not offer much hope of finding a safe and stable home.

## RECOMMENDATION

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The UK and French governments, with support of the Calais group, must **review the search and rescue capacity** currently available from both sides of the Channel. Both governments must commit to funding and organising increased search and rescue capacity as required. This must be genuine search and rescue and must not be aimed at or used for the criminalisation of people on the move.

## IMPACT ON THE BEREAVED

It is not uncommon for people to travel to northern France in an attempt to trace a loved one who is believed to have died while attempting to cross to the UK, or where they have received information that they were not rescued. This information usually comes from friends of the person who is missing, as states rarely proactively work to locate loved ones and trace relatives of the missing or deceased.

When they arrive in northern France, these people visit camps and contact associations in Calais and Dunkirk including the Red Cross who lead on family tracing, however these individuals often leave empty handed, unable to trace their loved one and without any promise of further action from the authorities. A volunteer at the Maison Margelle in Calais described:

**"Bilal came from the UK to stay at the house for a few days, because he had heard from his brother's friends that his brother had drowned after their boat broke down in the Channel. It was so difficult for him - the police didn't even want to meet with him initially as they said the photo of the brother didn't match any of the bodies they'd recovered from the shipwreck. Eventually Bilal did manage to meet with the police after the Red Cross insisted, but they basically just told him that if there was no body that matched, there was nothing more they could do."**

- Volunteer, Maison Margelle



While in some cases the police may be empathetic towards the bereaved, in others they are openly hostile. As Jeanne from the Maison Margelle described

**"On Wednesday morning, we went back to the police station beside the CRA [detention centre]... At one point, the police officer said to me: 'you understand, there are many of them looking for their brother or cousin for the money.' He went on: 'they obtain money by declaring their loved on deceased or disappeared.'"**

*- Jeanne, Maison Margelle*

This kind of accusation is both highly problematic and painful for the bereaved.

Moreover, it can be very difficult for bereaved families to access the documentation necessary to declare a disappeared relative deceased. A Red Cross officer working on restoring family links explained:

**"The person who was in my role before me had contacted a lawyer to discuss the possibility of having disappearance certificates made. Because I think that according to French law, you can only declare a [disappeared] person dead after a certain number of years. So the idea was to mitigate that for people who ask for it, because it blocks a lot of administrative procedures if your loved one hasn't been officially declared dead... There's nothing in place for these situations.**

**We alert the authorities when we hear of a disappearance, but no search at sea is done beyond the search that happens at the time of the rescue or interception of the boat. That's it. And if we tell the maritime gendarmerie that there's been a disappearance, they report it to Interpol."**

*- Officer working on restoring family links, Red Cross*

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **offer dignified administrative and practical support to the families and friends of those who have died or gone missing** at the border.

At a protest event that took place on Calais' main beach on the 20th of September 2025, Jeanne from the Maison Margelle read out the testimony of Ossama, a young Syrian man whose father disappeared in a shipwreck in October 2024, while they attempted the crossing together.

Ossama's experience clearly shows how people go missing during shipwrecks, the pain that disappearances cause the bereaved, and the challenges of prompting police action and investigation into these cases including support for families to locate loved ones and access justice in relation to their deaths and disappearances.

## OSSAMA'S TESTIMONY



"I'd like to tell you about what happened to us on the 23rd of October. Our inflatable boat exploded in the French sea while we were on our way to England.

Two or three kilometers from the coast, the boat exploded and we capsized to the left. We fell in the water and tried to keep our heads above the surface, looking for something to hold on to. We clung to the remains of the boat floating in the water. We were in the middle of the sea, shouting loudly. There were around 65 of us on a 6-metre boat, most of us without life jackets.

After an hour, two boats passed by, their lights were directed towards us but none of them came to help us. They called the coastguard who took between one and two hours to arrive. Forty-eight people were rescued, three people were dead and fourteen missing, including my father. We lost them at sea. We know nothing more about them. None of them were found.<sup>137</sup> The sea swallowed them up. To this day, we have no information.

I cannot get the noise of those moments and the voices of the people out of my head. I can still see them and hear them, and would so much like to have news of them. My father is one of those missing from the shipwreck, one of those we cannot bury. He is not counted among the dead, and he is no longer among the living.

Little by little, over the weeks and months that followed the shipwreck, bodies were washed up by the sea onto Calais's beaches. Was he among those bodies? I don't know. I stayed in Calais for weeks, hoping to find some trace of him, waiting for information, for answers. I found none.

With each body that the sea washed up, I hoped to be able to identify him, bury him, mourn him to give our loved ones the confirmation, but I was not allowed to do so, and still am not. I walked the beaches of the coast for days on end, hoping to find my father.



137 - In fact, 11 of the fourteen people reported missing have since been identified.

From police station to police station, from department to department, searching for information, I was shown images of the body parts that had been found and details of the clothing, which made it possible to determine that it was not him. My DNA test has not been compared with the last body found in December, even though I have requested twice a month that this be done. I was told it was a procedural error. It's been nine months... what if it was him?

We survived the war in Syria, fled the country, and were forced into exile, yet the last time I saw my father was on board that inflatable boat in French waters.

Police funding in Calais and Dunkirk has increased year on year on year, with huge financial contributions from the UK and French governments. But as Jamal asks, **"are they here to protect people in need?"**

State violence against people on the move continues even after death and disappearance, when people reported missing are not searched for, and their loved ones left in a potentially unending limbo. Both governments must urgently implement robust policies and procedures to make sure that no person reported missing on land or at sea goes unsearched for, much like protocols they follow in cases where their own citizens go missing. The relevant state must also reopen all cases where it is thought a person remains missing. Above all, the French and UK governments must accept the human costs of their policies, and take steps to end violence at the border.

## INDIFFERENCE IN DEALING WITH THE DECEASED AND BEREAVED

Even in cases where the bodies of the dead are found, procedures surrounding the identification of the deceased, the reclamation of the body by the family, and its burial or repatriation are opaque, complex and slow. This is interpreted by many people who are involved in accompanying bereaved family and friends of the deceased through these processes as a result of state indifference towards these deaths. Juliette, manager of the Secours Catholique in Calais at the time of our interview in 2024, described:

**"I think it's a pure lack of interest. If they were French, I think they [the authorities] would pay more attention to people in mourning than to procedures. But because they're foreign, more onus is placed on [administrative] procedures than on their suffering."**

- Juliette, Secours Catholique

Similarly, Pauline, a solidarity actor involved in supporting the bereaved, explained:

**"It's always hard to know whether there's a real legal obstacle or if they just don't care."**

- Pauline, solidarity actor supporting the bereaved

It has even happened that a Sudanese man who died after being hit by a lorry on the motorway in 2023 was seemingly "forgotten" about by state authorities. Juliette described:

**"We have a case so absurd it makes me want to rip my hair out. We don't even know which court is responsible for him and his case. Is it the court in Lille? In Boulogne? Or Dunkirk? We don't know where the case is stuck nor why, because they keep pointing the finger at each other... It's as though no one is responsible for this person - at least that's how it seems to me."**

- Juliette, Secours Catholique

Such situations lead to very long and unclear waiting times for families who, along with grieving the premature loss of a family member, face opaque administrative procedures. These lengthy procedures clearly stem from the fact that people on the move are negatively racialised at the border, that they are undocumented and far from home.

A person we spoke to who works in the undertaking industry explained:

**"Sometimes bodies are left in the morgue for ages. It's happened several times, and only to migrants... Once a migrant person I buried was stuck in the morgue for almost a year. They just leave them in the morgue, they freeze them. It's inhumane. ...I've never seen that happen to a French person... If a French person is murdered, things will go very fast. Even if the case needs to go through a judge, within a week they'll be buried."**

- Anonymous, undertaker

Bereaved friends and family members are also often (though not always) poorly received by the authorities. Juliette described:

**"It's shocking that so few means are put towards identifying people who have passed away, so few police available to receive their families, to explain and accompany them through the process."**

- Juliette, Secours Catholique

Another humanitarian association employee similarly explained:

**"At no point is there a government body, be it the justice system or the police, that listens to the families, there's no dedicated space..."**

- Anonymous, humanitarian worker

These delays are particularly painful for the bereaved. On the 14th of January 2024, Ali Al Oklah, a 26-year-old Syrian man, drowned in the Channel along with four other Syrian men. On hearing the news, his brother travelled to northern France from another European country to take a DNA test and identify his brother's body. Test results should only take around 10 days to come back, but in practice this often takes several weeks.

Ali's body was not released to the family and buried until almost three months after his death. His brother described:

**"For Muslims, to give dignity to the dead is to bury them quickly... If a relative dies but is left unburied, every day that passes it is as if the person is dying again... I don't want anything from France, all I want is to get my brother's body back and to bury him with dignity."**

- Odai, brother of Ali <sup>138</sup>

The deaths and disappearances of people on the move at the UK-France border occur due to both states' fixation on securitisation and militarisation of the border. Slogans such as 'stop the boats' and 'smash the gangs' characterise the situation, over attempts to protect life and offer dignity to those whose lives have been ended by this hostile regime.

Whilst millions are spent on surveillance and violence, no thought is given to those who have died as a result of these policies, or to the life changing impact their death and disappearance will have on their relatives and friends. Clear racial bias is shown in the disparity between how a person on the move's death or disappearance is responded to by the state as opposed to a European citizen.

In attempting to commemorate all those who have died at the border in this report, we relied on citizen and journalist compiled lists (Calais Migrant Solidarity and Le Mémorial de Calais). Despite the best efforts of those involved in honouring the memory of all those lost at the border, it is difficult to find and collate all of this information.

**Each death is an entirely avoidable tragedy.** It should be a priority of both the French and UK government to publish data around deaths and investigate every death at the border whilst also taking urgent steps to prevent further loss of life and injury.

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **jointly publish regular data about those who have died and gone missing** in the Channel and at the border, including age, sex and nationality. The UK government should accept Nadia Whittome's proposed amendment to the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to ensure this provision.
- The UK and French governments must **offer dignified administrative and practical support to the families and friends of those who have died or gone missing** at the border.

# SECTION 5: SUMMARY

## CROSSINGS FROM FRANCE TO THE UK - "YOU CAN'T LEAVE"

Section 5 has shown how people experience high levels of violence around crossing attempts. This includes during dangerous lorry crossings; at the hands of smuggling networks who exist due to the lack of safe routes; through police interventions around small boat crossings; and through the lack of support and dignity afforded people during shipwreck, death and disappearance. People find they 'can't leave' France.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### LORRY CROSSINGS

- People still attempt to cross by lorry, especially when they cannot afford to pay for a small boat crossing. This means unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable to attempting lorry crossings.
- During lorry crossing attempts, people are at risk from violence from police, private security and drivers trying to prevent them from entering lorries.
- Lorry crossings are inherently dangerous and put people at risk of injury and death. As it has become harder to climb on lorries in car parks, people attempt to climb on board as lorries are moving, which is more dangerous.

#### BOAT CROSSINGS

- Boat crossings are an inherently dangerous way to cross which people are forced to rely on due to the lack of safe routes to the UK.
- Boat crossings have been made increasingly dangerous through growing police violence on the beaches. Police routinely use tear gas and flashballs against people trying to board boats, and slash boats in and out of the water with knives.
- Increased police violence means embarking happens in more chaotic and panicked situations. This leads to deaths and injuries. In 2025 Utopia 56 recorded police violence linked to crossing attempts against an average of 7 people per day.

#### STATE RESPONSE TO FATALITY & RISK

- Police often fail to take action when people are in danger or go missing in the water. This can lead to injury and death.
- State services fail to support the families of those who die or go missing at the border.
- The French and UK governments have prioritised surveillance to criminalise people crossing the border, rather than increasing search and rescue capacity. This means people are left at risk when shipwrecks happen, and is responsible for deaths at the border.

## URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

### EMERGENCY RESPONSE

- The UK and French governments, with support of the Calais group, must **review the search and rescue capacity** currently available from both sides of the Channel. Both governments must commit to funding and organising increased search and rescue capacity as required. This must be genuine search and rescue and must not be aimed at or used for the surveillance and criminalisation of people on the move.
- The UK and French governments must **commit to searching for missing people**, creating more capacity through increased funding and planning where needed.

### LIMITING HARM

- The UK and French governments must **commit to not implementing violent police actions which will endanger life**, such as pullbacks or interventions in the water.

## TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

### DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES

- The UK and French governments must **pause all security spending at the UK-France border until a statutory inquiry into the increase in violence and deaths since the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty is carried out**. This investigation should seek to establish how UK funding contributed to the increase in violence, including the rise in power of smugglers in response to heightened security and lack of safe routes.
- The UK and French governments must **jointly publish regular data about those who have died and gone missing in the Channel and at the border**, including age, sex and nationality. The UK government should accept Nadia Whittome's proposed amendment to the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to ensure this provision.

### RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE

- The UK and French governments must **offer dignified administrative and practical support to the families and friends of those who have died or gone missing** at the border.

## BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

### ENDING STATE VIOLENCE

- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.
- The UK and French governments must **end violent police interceptions of crossing attempts**, whether by small boat or lorry. **Both governments must end their funding** of these operations.

### ACCESS TO ASYLUM

- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

# 6

# AFTER CROSSING ATTEMPTS

**“Four guys attacked us while we were sleeping, near the beach. First my friend was shot in the leg, then I was.... the police came to my hospital room in Calais to take my testimony. Then they took me with them to Boulogne to see a police [forensic] doctor. After that, they left me in the street and told me to make my own way back to Calais.”**

*- Ismail, who stayed at the Maison Margelle in summer 2024*

## 6.a. FOLLOW-UP TREATMENT IN FRANCE

The treatment of people on the move within France after violent experiences often only furthers this violence. After being made to feel unwelcome and unsafe in France and trying to leave, people are then prevented from leaving and subjected to a range of violent acts as covered in section 5a-c.

Then, instead of being supported in the aftermath of a traumatic event, they are once again met with violence and hostility. This occurs after shipwrecks and failed crossing attempts, in challenges to accessing healthcare, as well as when testifying to violence and attempting to access legal support and justice after violent incidents.

## AFTER SHIPWRECKS AND FAILED CROSSING ATTEMPTS

When people have experienced shipwrecks or failed crossing attempts, they are often cold and wet. They have often spent a long time trying to cross and are hungry and exhausted.

However, rather than being offered dry clothes, shelter, food and medical support, people are often treated without respect or dignity by the police. People are often taken into police custody and questioned for hours on the traumatic events they have just experienced. Jeanne, from the Maison Margelle team, described:

**“A family arrived [at the house] late on Saturday. They had been rescued out at sea, in the middle of the day. 86 people were on the boat. Two men and a woman died. All of the survivors were held at the police station beside the detention centre [in Coquelles] until 9pm, wet and without food. They were then released into the commercial area nearby with their emergency blankets - some were barefoot. They had to walk for hours to get back to Calais.”**

- Jeanne, Maison Margelle

Flore Judet from L'Auberge des Migrants explains:

**“When all the people on a boat, or a large number of them, are going to be questioned, that also falls within the scope of violence, and that is violence that is mandated, that is jointly linked between the United Kingdom and France. As soon as there is a shipwreck, people are rescued. Those who need it are fortunately sent to hospital, but everyone else, even if there have been 10, 15 or 20 deaths, is taken to the border police for questioning, which can last for hours. In general, they have no access to food or water. So in terms of violence, that's what the government does.”**

- Flore Judet, L'Auberge des Migrants

In one case, the father of a 7 year old girl who had just died was held for hours of questioning, while his wife and other young children waited for him.<sup>139</sup>

In September 2024, the night after at least 12 people died in a shipwreck,<sup>140</sup> French authorities went further, conducting a large-scale eviction of the living site where the majority of people on the affected boat lived. Although this was an extreme example, given the regularity of evictions within Calais and Dunkirk, it is not uncommon that people return from shipwrecks to find their living site cleared.<sup>141</sup>

Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56, described a new police tactic emerging in 2025 after failed crossing attempts:

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<sup>139</sup> - See <https://www.project-play.org/we-want-to-be-safe>

<sup>140</sup> - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/sep/03/rescue-under-way-in-channel-as-boat-carrying-at-least-100-capsizes>

<sup>141</sup> - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/sep/04/french-police-clear-site-where-victims-of-channel-tragedy-are-said-to-have-lived>

**“There is both police violence when they leave the beach and then more institutional violence and, above all, a failure to provide access to rights and to meet people's needs, where the police block, surround and escort people on the beach and then force them to return to the nearest town, to the nearest station, without access to water, without access to food, without access to accommodation, etc. day and night, and sometimes this can involve a forced march of up to 10 km, where people are supervised by riot police and walk from their beach to, for example, Calais last time, and all without any explanation of the legal framework under which this was being done, without anything being distributed in terms of food or water, without access to clothing when people are soaked, without access to medicine when people are injured, etc.**

**And then, in the end, people are just surrounded until they leave or take the train back to where they live. This is becoming more and more common. The first report of it was this winter, I think, in January, and now, for the past two months [May and June 2025], it's been happening regularly. We made three referrals to the ombudsman, three different situations, and it happened twice, twice more, so at least five times we witnessed it and people called us, etc., but it always involves 150 people. You see it's not just one person, and so there's both physical police violence on the beach and then more systemic or institutional violence or a general violation of people's rights.”**

*- Angèle Vettorello, Utopia 56*

Not only are basic needs such as food and water unmet by the authorities after failed crossing attempts, but people can also struggle to access medical attention even in extreme cases. For example, Refugee Women's Centre recounted the following incident:

**“Following a shipwreck on 19 October 2024, several women were burned by the boat's engine and were unable to receive immediate medical attention upon their return to the beach or port. They only received medical care later that day because they managed to reach the hospital and because we were able to accompany them.”**

*- Refugee Women's Centre*

## RECOMMENDATION

## URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The French and UK governments must **plan, fund and provide adapted support to survivors** of shipwrecks/failed crossings, including: shelter, food, drink, and first response; adapted psychological support; and ending violent treatment of survivors including arrest and interrogation.

## ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE

The everyday nature of violence and injury at the UK-France border means people on the move often need to seek access to healthcare. As described in [section 4a](#), the poor living conditions imposed on people on the move in Calais and Dunkirk mean people often need treatment for skin conditions, infections and flus, along with mental health care in some cases and treatment for serious injuries of the kind described in section 5.

Fortunately, in France healthcare is for the most part provided for undocumented people, and people on the move benefit from treatment in hospitals and PASS clinics at the border. A PASS<sup>142</sup> clinic was first established in Calais in 2006, in an effort to relieve pressure on the emergency department caused by the great need for medical care among people on the move. The creation of the PASS was advocated for by medical NGOs at the border, who put pressure on the state to take up its responsibilities in treating ill and injured people on the move.<sup>143</sup> However, the very need for a separate clinic emphasises the great need for healthcare, which is directly linked to the violent conditions for living at and crossing the border in the absence of safe routes.

Whereas in Calais the hospital and PASS are relatively close to the living sites of people on the move or easily accessible by bus, in Dunkirk access to the PASS clinic and hospital is much more difficult, as they are located at a significant distance from people's living sites (around 13km). A Médecins du Monde employee describes this problem, as well as explaining that many people on the move are afraid to seek access to healthcare:

**“We’ve heard a lot of testimonies from people who, out of fear of the police, don’t seek treatment, and whose health situation has deteriorated as a result. They’re afraid of the authorities in general and in some cases this extends to the hospital. It’s hard for us to imagine, but it’s something we hear a lot. First of all, the PASS is really far away [from the living sites] and it’s hard for us to convince people to go because the hospital...**

142 - Permanence d’Accès aux Soins de Santé (PASS) are clinics that provide healthcare for people who do not have health insurance, as is the case with most people on the move in Calais and Dunkirk. These clinics often have interpreters on hand to assist with every interpretation for patients in key languages.

143 - Anthropologist Chloé Tisserand has written a book about the PASS clinic in Calais titled *Calais, une médecine de l’exil* (Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2023). See pages 9-15 for details on the history of the establishment of the clinic.

...represents a form of authority, so fear of having your fingerprints taken, fear of having to pay, and so we need to deconstruct all of that...And for people who would like to go to hospital autonomously, they have to walk 45 minutes from the camp to the bus stop, and often the PAF [border police] are there doing random checks. So people risk being detained by the police... It even happened once that the police tried to carry out identity checks in the PASS waiting room... If you consider all of this together, it's not surprising that an image of the hospital as an unsafe place is reinforced."

- Employee, Médecins du Monde

Although medical care is accessible, we also heard of significant obstacles to this care. For example, we heard cases of people on the move struggling to access certain medical services at the border, particularly in cases where follow-up secondary care is needed after serious incidents. Feyrouz Lajili, MSF coordinator, describes an example of this:

"In January 2024, we supported a young man for several weeks, a young Afghan who had three fingers broken by a flashball shot on the beach and who then had to undergo surgery. We followed him to his medical appointments and to his physiotherapy sessions, as he needed physiotherapy to maintain the mobility of his fingers. So we accompanied him to his appointments. We even covered the cost of the physiotherapy appointments, because in fact, as long as people do not have AME [state medical aid], they can't access services other than urgent care in hospital without paying."

- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator

A lack of access to interpretation within some medical services is also a barrier to people accessing medical care (with the PASS clinics being a notable exception where interpretation is usually provided). This means that in some cases, people do not understand the medical procedures that are carried out on their bodies. When asked about a procedure he underwent in hospital, Munir, who we met in Calais in August 2024, responded:

"I don't feel or know anything about what they did. I just woke up in the bedroom after the operation. I don't know what happened during the operation exactly."

- Munir, who we met in Calais in 2024

Feyrouz Lajili, former coordinator at MSF, explains:

**“This is a big issue that we are trying to work on here at MSF, because there are many times when, for example, our psychologist cannot provide quality referrals because she knows that there is no interpreting available. So yes, various strands of healthcare exist, but in fact, there is no interpreting. And similarly, there are many times when we have had to do follow-ups with our own intercultural mediator colleagues - when they have had to do the translation because there was a problem with access to interpreting or simply a lack of interpreting.”**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

Similarly, a volunteer with the Maria Skobtsova House described coming up with a makeshift solution when faced with communication issues at a medical appointment:

**“Once, I accompanied a pregnant woman from Eritrea to the hospital for a check up. The nurse we spoke to said that she needed to have a blood test, but the woman panicked about this - she was worried that something might be injected into her. She didn’t speak any English, so I ended up calling an Eritrean friend of mine who explained everything to her over the phone and calmed her down.”**

*- Volunteer, Maria Skobtsova House*

In the absence of people accompanying the patient, their understanding of what’s happening to them often depends on the goodwill of the nurse or doctor at hand, and on whether they will take the time to try and find someone who can translate, or simply use a translation app on their phone. This however could easily be rectified if hospitals and clinics would subscribe to (and encourage their healthcare professionals to use) services such as ISM Interprétariat,<sup>144</sup> an association-provided phone interpretation service specialised in socio-medical and administrative support for migrant people.

Another important issue is the lack of housing solutions for people on the move after they have been released from hospital. As Marianne from the Maison Margelle explained:

**“It’s not that the hospital isn’t caring for people properly, it’s just that it can’t adapt to the fact that these people are unhoused.”**

*- Marianne, Maison Margelle*

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144 - <https://ism-interpretariat.fr/>

Indeed, there's only little that the hospital can do for people beyond treating them to the point that they are ready to be released from hospital (except in some cases where housing may be found if the level of post-hospital care required is very high), but it is also unsafe for those recovering from injury to find themselves back in the hostile environment of the camps. In the absence of adequate state-provided solutions,<sup>145</sup> the burden of care is placed on welcome houses like the Maison Margelle as well as on citizen hosts, who are not always well-equipped to host people on crutches or in wheelchairs.

Once again, this contributes to people on the move being treated in an undignified and unsafe way, compounding the state's violence towards and dehumanisation of people on the move. Even in the aftermath of a traumatic event, people on the move are not afforded the same dignity and care as others in more secure situations may be. Whether due to racial bias, lack of political will or inaction, this can also be seen in medical settings.

## RECOMMENDATION

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

- The French authorities must **ensure the provision of adequate interpretation services** across all emergency services and medical providers in northern France. They must also **ensure people can access medical services** without fear of being detained by police.

## OBSTACLES TO JUSTICE

People on the move experience significant violence and injustice at the border, yet there are numerous obstacles to them seeking justice and accountability.

When people on the move are victims of violence in northern France, they are often not provided with guidance or assistance from the police or other agencies in accessing legal support to seek justice for what has happened. Police may be interested in violent incidents when it seems to be linked to smuggling or violence between people on the move, (in which case testimonies collected from victims may be used to incriminate others), but they rarely offer the further support or guidance a person might expect after having fallen victim to violence. Put simply, they are not treated as victims deserving of justice.

This is reflected in the case of Ismaïl from Sudan, who was hosted at the Maison Margelle in summer 2024, recovering from a gunshot wound to the leg. When we spoke to him about what had happened, he explained:

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145 - While the injured could go to a CAES (Centre d'Accueil et d'Examen des Situations) to recover, these are often not well equipped to welcome the injured, and are strategically located by the state far from the border - and thus far from the hospital and clinic where the convalescent will often need to attend regular medical appointments during their convalescence.

**“Four guys attacked us while we were sleeping, near the beach. First my friend was shot in the leg, then I was. My friends helped us get back to the Sudanese jungle, then they called an ambulance. [This all happened] this morning. The police came to my hospital room in Calais to take my testimony. Then they took me with them to Boulogne to see a police [forensic] doctor. After that, they left me in the street and told me to make my own way back to Calais.”**

*- Ismail, houseguest at the Maison Margelle in summer 2024*

Ismail's account of how he was treated by the French police after he was violently attacked reflects the police's lack of care for this victim of violence. The police were clearly interested in collecting forensic evidence from his body that might support a criminal investigation against smugglers (whom he had identified as the perpetrators of violence), but not in treating him as a victim in need of support and potential legal guidance, were he to decide to press charges against his aggressors. This is reflected in the fact that he was not informed about this possibility and in the police's refusal to accompany him back to Calais or even the nearest train station, despite him having been shot that same day. Along with general hostility between police and people on the move at the border, there often seems to be an assumption among police that people on the move are in transit, and thus easily excludable from the rights to which they are entitled.

It is very difficult for people who are in a precarious administrative situation to approach the authorities and seek justice. Testifying to the police seems hopeless to many people on the move, who also experience constant evictions, hostility and violence from the police while they are at the border.

Organisations have encountered cases where in the event of very serious violence a police investigation is opened, but many people on the move who were eyewitnesses to the violence are reluctant to go into the police station to testify. The judiciary police station for example is located right beside the detention centre in Coquelles, instilling fear in potential eyewitnesses whose testimony could be crucial. This is also reflected in the experiences of people forced to testify in the aftermath of shipwrecks, as detailed above.

Feyrouz Lajili, former coordinator at MSF, explained how it is rare for people who experience road-related violence (in which there was an intent to injure) to seek justice for this. Speaking about an exceptional case in which a young man had experienced violence at the hands of a lorry driver at put in a complaint against them, she described:

**“The young man filed a complaint and we supported him through the legal procedure. He won the trial and received compensation from the lorry driver, who was convicted of violence against him. But most of the young people we meet and whose testimonies we have collected don’t want to file a complaint.”**

*- Feyrouz Lajili, former MSF coordinator*

Indeed, along with the above deterrents to approaching the authorities to seek justice, in a few cases of road violence we heard accounts of police visiting the injured in their hospital rooms with an interpreter and encouraging them not to press charges against lorry or car drivers in cases such as this one, where there was a clear intention on the part of the driver to harm. In these cases, faced with pressure from the police, the injured usually won’t press charges, concerned that it could compromise an asylum application in France. Practices such as these emphasise how violence against people on the move is often unchallenged by the state, since it falls in line with their objective of creating a hostile environment and not allowing people to cross the border.

Bearing in mind how difficult it often is for people on the move to testify about violence committed against them by smugglers, other people on the move, locals or far-right extremists, it comes as no surprise that testifying about police violence is even more difficult, as described in [section 4c](#) on random police violence.

Finally, if victims of violence are still in the process of trying to cross the border, it is easy to see why they might abandon the idea of seeking justice, their main goal being border passage. Once they have arrived in the UK however, it is difficult for them to seek justice for something that happened to them in France. This calls for the creation of cross-border reporting and accountability mechanisms.

The evidence gathered in this section emphasises how there are numerous obstacles to justice for people on the move who fall victim to violence in the border zone. This is profoundly problematic, because in contexts where accountability mechanisms fall short, the likelihood of violence intensifying, exacerbated by a sense of impunity is high. In the light of these findings, it is vital that both the UK and French governments take responsibility for this violence, implementing mechanisms which ensure that violence of all kinds may be easily documented and investigated on both sides of the border.

## RECOMMENDATION

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.

## 6.b. ARRIVAL IN THE UK

**“When we arrived in the UK, the British coastguards didn’t treat us as a human. They just pulled us by our clothes, pushed us, and forced us to sit with their hands when they wanted us to sit.”**

- Mahmoud, an unaccompanied teenager who arrived in the UK in March 2025

On arrival in UK waters, people also describe being subject to violent and inhumane treatment.

The UK’s response to those who arrive by small boat or lorry to claim asylum in the UK is one characterised by criminalisation, adultification, hostility, totally lacking in dignity and respect of basic rights. There are no meaningful policies or practices that respond to the urgent need to safeguard those who arrive. Many of those who arrive have been subjected to extreme violence and abuse during their journeys to the UK, including torture, trafficking and modern slavery and violence at the hands of the state.

All the while, as the UK government continues to finance state abuses in the forests and beaches of northern France, adding to this catalogue of abuses faced by people on the move, it simultaneously fails to respond with dignity and respect to survivors of this abuse upon arrival, people are met with yet more violence and abuses. People who have experienced a traumatic experience, spending many hours at sea, are not treated with dignity or compassion, but instead with violence. Haddish, a woman who arrived in the UK in 2025, shared her experience:

**“When UK Border Force came to get us, they threw us from the small boat into the big boat. From the small boats to the big boats when we reached the shores - I don’t know if they do it to all people - I was pregnant so it was really scary for me. They threw me into the big boats, it was really scary and not safe. I thought I lost my baby until I went to the doctor.”**

- Haddish, who arrived in the UK in 2025

It is unsurprising that people’s initial impressions of the UK authorities are often negative, given what is to follow. This report cannot include an analysis of the myriad institutional violences of the UK asylum system, which consistently causes significant harm to those seeking safety. However, it is important to mention several key instances of violence which

relate closely to the UK-France border, and signpost the research which centres people's experiences of this.

Humans for Rights Network works extensively with people in the UK asylum system, conducting complex casework and gathering evidence of systemic abuse perpetrated by the state. In particular we work with unaccompanied children wrongly treated as adults, children treated as adult subject to criminal charges due to their 'illegal arrival' to the UK, people housed in military barracks and people subjected to harm and abuse at the UK-France border including those removed under the joint UK/France 'one in, one out' scheme.

## AGE ASSESSMENTS

**"Children stay with adults. They forced me to accept an age that wasn't my age."**

- Osman, aged 15, HFRN client

**HFRN has provided support to over 2500 children wrongly treated as adults after short age determination interviews conducted hours after children arrive to the UK by small boat or lorry.**

Through this casework, many children reported the violence they had experienced in France to our service, a significant factor in our decision to produce this report.

These age interviews are based solely on the physical appearance and demeanor of an individual. They adultify children, resulting in them being placed in adult accommodations such as hotels and camps, immigration removal centers and adult prisons. In the context of the UK-France border, adultifying children results in them being treated as adults is a form of extreme abuse that denies children their rights to safety, protection, health care and recovery, and are shut out of child protection systems. The UK's policy of securing its border rather than offering welcome and protection extends right the way through the UK asylum system impacting even the most basic of rights based principles.

Another child told HFRN:

**"I can't sleep overnight, I'm scared and don't feel safe. I want to stay with people of my own age and to be able to study. They asked me to show my arms and hair and face. The one asking questions was telling me I'm lying all the time".**

- Anonymous, child encountered by HFRN

Humans for Rights Network has written extensively about the violent impact of age determination interviews upon arrival on unaccompanied children - see: [Forced Adulthood: The Home Office's incorrect determination of age and how this leaves child refugees at risk \(January 2024\)](#) and [Lost Childhoods: The consequences of flawed age assessments at the UK border \(March 2025\)](#).

## CRIMINALISATION

Those crossing the Channel by irregular routes (which are the only available to them) have been increasingly criminalised since the Nationality and Borders Act (2022). The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which is in parliament at the time of writing, is set to extend this even further. For more information on this, see [No such thing as justice here \(2024\)](#) and [I told them the truth \(2025\)](#). This includes at least 30 children wrongly treated as adults subject to criminal charges, with at least 19 spending time incarcerated in adult prisons.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK government must **repeal the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and end the practice of criminalising people for arriving at the border**. This practice contravenes the UK's obligations under international law, and does not have the purported 'deterrence' effect. It should also **remove clauses 13-18 of the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to prevent any further criminalisation** of people seeking safety.

## 'ONE IN, ONE OUT'

In August 2025, the French and UK governments confirmed a pilot scheme of a new 'one in, one out' policy. This policy enables the return of people who have crossed the Channel in a small boat to France, in exchange for someone who has applied to come to the UK via a scheme which will then allow them to apply for asylum on arrival in the UK.

This scheme is the starkest example of how a person is unable to stay yet also unable to leave as laid out throughout this report. People are not able to apply for protection in the UK, rapidly removed to France, before many are subject to the Dublin procedure, facing removal to a third country where they have in many cases experienced harm and abuses.

**This effectively 'disappears' people who have no possibility of existing 'legally' in any safe country. Where should these people go? Where will they find protection?**

It is also crucial to note that although the option for people to apply to come to the UK in France and then apply for asylum has been sold as a 'safe route', it can only exist whilst others have crossed in small boats and can be 'exchanged' for people applying in France. If everyone stopped crossing in small boats, the alleged 'safe route' would no longer be able to admit anyone. Therefore it is clear that this relies totally on the continuation of life-threatening small boat crossings.

At the time of writing at least 300 people have been detained immediately upon arriving to the UK, for removal to France, with at least 55 people being removed to France. The UK has taken these actions considering France as a 'safe country' to be removed to: as this report has shown, France is far from safe for those who have crossed the Channel. In October 2025 HFRN visited some of those removed to France.

HFRN travelled to Paris in mid-October to meet with a number of people who had previously been removed to France under the 'one in, one out scheme'. Our intention was to connect individuals to support services in France, as well as to establish, through interviews, the impact of this scheme on those removed, including if they are able to access protection in France and the reception conditions they face in France.

The information contained in this document was gathered during semi structured interviews and general discussion with 12 people. HFRN remains in contact with people removed and will be providing further information on the implementation of this scheme in due course, in collaboration with those affected.

It documents the removal of vulnerable people under the "out-route", including victims of torture and trafficking, alongside the failure to explore family connections, provide access to legal advice or identify protection needs prior to removal. Further evidence is given regarding allegations of violence during removal. New evidence is also provided regarding the harmful accommodation conditions in France, including the lack of medical care and overcrowded living conditions, as well as barriers to accessing legal advice and information.

## PROCEDURES IN THE UK

HFRN has identified at least 3 cases where connections to the UK, such as relatives, were not fully explored before they were removed.

**Three of the people they spoke to had relatives in the UK, two have sisters and one an aunt. These men could not access legal advice in order to make representations in relation to this family connection they have to the UK.**

Two of these people were visited by these relatives whilst in the Immigration Removal Centre in the UK.

**HFRN has also documented a case where a man was bailed from detention by a court in the UK due to a disability and mental health concerns, only to then be returned to the Immigration Removal Centre and removed to France within 7 days despite no material change to his condition**

## **TORTURE AND TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS**

It continues to be clear that victims of torture and trafficking are being selected for the out-route without adequate safeguarding.

**HFRN has documented cases of torture survivors and trafficking victims whose experiences had not been adequately explored in the UK before their removal.**

We spoke to three men who reported that they had experienced torture, two of these men reported torture and extreme violence in Poland, with a third reporting torture in Libya. One of the men who reported torture and extreme violence in Poland, also reported torture in Eritrea.

Four men (two of those who also experienced torture are included in this number) reported modern slavery - two in Libya, one in Ethiopia and one in Yemen. These men had raised these experiences in a variety of ways, during adults at risk assessments, where National Referral Mechanism (NRM) interviews took place (where they were aware they had one) and in direct correspondence with the Home Office.

Overwhelmingly these men were distressed and confused, some had no contact with their lawyer, while others were unsure about what their lawyers had done to make representations regarding these experiences. Others were not certain if NRM interviews had taken place or if these experiences had been considered by the Home Office prior to their removal.

## **TREATMENT DURING REMOVAL**

**Two men reported experiencing or witnessing violence during their removal from the UK and on the plane to France.**

One man was unable to speak fully to HFRN about his experience due to the impact this has had on him but said that he was 'nearly killed' during his transport from the Immigration Removal Centre to the airport having suffered violence at the hands of those escorting him.

A second man told HFRN that there was another person being removed to France on the same flight as him that was subjected to violence on the plane, including having his head pushed into and held against the seat to the extent that he was rendered unconscious.

## NEW INFORMATION ON HARMFUL CONDITIONS IN FRANCE

HFRN obtained new and concerning information regarding the reception conditions in France.

No medical care is being provided. People have experienced acute harm to their mental health and physical violence during their detention. Many also have existing health conditions and disabilities.

**Yet, no medical care is provided to respond to or assist people in recovering from or managing their health conditions.**

One man has a visual impairment, being blind in one eye. Two other men are suffering from severe depression, with a third man reporting that he is experiencing suicidal ideation.

The living conditions are extremely overcrowded. The men are sleeping in a large marquee tent with 30 people sharing a tent. There is no privacy, and sleep is frequently disrupted by the noise of others and due to the tent's proximity to train tracks.

## LACK OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND LEGAL ADVICE

No information about the asylum process is being provided to people in detention in France. When the OFII (Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration, the French Office for Immigration and Integration) visits, the emphasis is placed on voluntary removal, rather than informing people of their rights, including how to claim asylum, how to access legal advice, or the informing people about how the Dublin Regulations might impact their asylum claims. The limited information that is given is only available in French or English, and no interpreter is provided.

One man was unaware that he had made an asylum claim in France. He holds a document titled "Attestation de demande d'asile – Procédure Dublin" which HFRN presume was made so that he could then be removed under the Dublin Procedure. However, he had no awareness of having made this claim. There has been no clarity or legal advice provided to him regarding the process he is in or what this means for his situation.

**This lack of information is forcing people into very difficult and dangerous situations, including destitution. For example, people are enduring street homelessness because they believe that this is the only way to avoid removal from France.**

## NO HUMANITY HERE

Overall, HFRN found that there is considerable confusion, uncertainty and misinformation surrounding these cases - these men do not know who their lawyers were, what actions were taken on their behalf, nor do they know what the Home Office did or did not take into account when deciding on their removal.

**They do not know if they will be able to access protection in France, or what the next days and weeks will hold for them.**

HFRN considers that each of the 12 men they engaged with has significant case facts indicating their removal should never have taken place, and that key experiences such as torture and trafficking were not adequately considered. A number of key issues were raised by those we met:

### ● INADEQUATE AND UNSAFE HOUSING

Many of those we met reported they were sleeping on the floor or in unsuitable spaces.

### ● LACK OF PROPER HEALTHCARE

Survivors of torture and those with serious health conditions do not receive adequate medical care or psychological support.

### ● INSUFFICIENT FOOD AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Many receive food only once or twice a week, and some do not receive any at all.

### ● FAMILY SEPARATION

Several of those we met have family in the UK, but cannot contact or reunite with them due to the current return policies and rushed removals.

### ● LACK OF INFORMATION

The complex asylum procedure in France is very unclear to navigate with no information provided.

### ● FALLING BETWEEN THE GAPS

The person who travels to the UK is taken responsibility of by the UK, the person who is removed to France should be the responsibility of France and be protected by France, and not removed to another country under the Dublin agreement.

### ● LACK OF SUPPORT

Those we spoke to arrived in France after prolonged periods of time detained in Immigration Removal Centres, which they described to us as a prison. It was made clear that they need treatment and time to recover from this.

Those we spoke to gave this clear message:

**“We have no rights in France, we have lost everything. If France agrees to accept us then they should have responsibility for us, to hear our asylum claims. The two governments are using us”.**

*- A group of people removed to France under the 'one in, one out' scheme*

The entirety of the UK asylum system is riddled with incompetence, abuse and failures to adequately protect people in need of safety. From an end to family reunion, to delayed asylum claims leaving people stuck at borders and unable to move forwards, to hostile racist rhetoric and targeting of people in hotels - people are demonised and vilified, with people seeking sanctuary used by successive governments as the reason for the social and economic decline experienced by so many in the UK.

## RECOMMENDATION

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

- The UK and French governments must **end the “one in, one out” scheme immediately, and permanently and immediately return all those removed to France.**

# SECTION 6: SUMMARY

## AFTER CROSSING ATTEMPTS

Section 6 demonstrates that violence does not end when people attempt to cross the border. In both France and the UK, people continue to be subjected to violence at the hands of the state.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### AFTER FAILED ATTEMPTS IN FRANCE

- People are treated inhumanely in France after failed crossing attempts, including by being detained and questioned for hours after witnessing deaths without basic needs being met.
- French medical services fail to provide adequate interpretation, meaning people cannot access healthcare properly.
- People are unable to access justice for violence they may have faced, as French police prioritise targeting smugglers over supporting victims.



#### AFTER ARRIVAL IN THE UK

- Children arriving in the UK are often wrongly age-assessed as adults, leading to dangerous living conditions for vulnerable young people.
- On arrival in the UK, people risk being criminalised for crossing the border.

#### “ONE IN, ONE OUT”

- The ‘one in, one out’ pilot implemented since August 2025 has led to the deportation of over 50 people at the time of writing. These people have been put at risk of danger and violence on return to France.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

#### EMERGENCY RESPONSE

- The French and UK governments must **plan, fund and provide adapted support to survivors** of shipwrecks/failed crossings, including:
  - Shelter, food, drink, and first response;
  - Adapted psychological support;
  - Ending violent treatment of survivors including arrest and interrogation.

#### RECEPTION IN FRANCE

- The French authorities must **ensure the provision of adequate interpretation services** across all emergency services and medical providers in northern France. They must also **ensure people can access medical services** without fear of being detained by police.

### TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

#### RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.

### BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

#### ACCESS TO ASYLUM

- The UK and French governments must **end the 'one in, one out' scheme immediately and permanently and immediately return all those removed to France.**
- The UK government must **repeal the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and end the practice of criminalising people for arriving at the border.** This practice contravenes the UK's obligations under international law, and does not have the purported 'deterrence' effect. It should also **remove clauses 13-18 of the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to prevent any further criminalisation of people seeking safety.**

# 7

# ENDING THE VIOLENCE

**“As a human, human beings have to be taken care of by everybody. Every immigrant...just wants to have a good situation.”**

*- Abel, who spent 2 months in Dunkirk in 2025*

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whether actively, through police violence, or through inaction, because people are neglected and left vulnerable to abuse and without safe routes to seek asylum, the UK and French governments are responsible for staggering levels of violence at the UK-France border.

This report has shown that this violence has devastating consequences for the individuals who are subjected to it. Both states have co-operated for years to organise and fund securitisation of the border which has led to death, disappearance, injury, psychological damage, and trapped people in a cycle of “can’t stay, can’t go”.

**It is time for the UK and France to use this co-operation and funding to support those seeking safety instead of harming them.**

Throughout this report, we have made a number of recommendations which will enable this shift, which are also listed below.

These recommendations are a necessary first step to ensuring justice for those affected and the fulfillment of fundamental human rights at the border; however, further work, including between a number of countries across Europe and the Global North, is necessary to ensure true justice for all.

## URGENT ACTION TO SAVE LIVES

### EMERGENCY RESPONSE

- The UK and French governments, with support of the Calais group, must **review the search and rescue capacity** currently available from both sides of the Channel. Both governments must commit to funding and organising increased search and rescue capacity as required. This must be genuine search and rescue and must not be aimed at or used for the surveillance and criminalisation of people on the move.
- The French and UK governments must **plan, fund and provide adapted support to survivors** of shipwrecks/failed crossings, including:
  - Shelter, food, drink, and first response;
  - Adapted psychological support;
  - Ending violent treatment of survivors including arrest and interrogation.
- The UK and French governments must **commit to searching for missing people**, creating more capacity through increased funding and planning where needed.

### RECEPTION IN FRANCE

- The UK and French governments must **collaborate to create and fund a dignified and safe reception for people on the move in northern France**, including shelter, access to food, water and hygiene services, and access to adapted safeguarding support.
- The French authorities must **ensure the provision of adequate interpretation services** across all emergency services and medical providers in northern France. They must also **ensure people can access medical services** without fear of being detained by police.
- The UK and French governments must **divert spending on militarisation to provide humanitarian assistance**, with a group convened including experts by experience and NGOs to determine adequate use of this funding.

### LIMITING HARM

- The UK and French governments must **commit to not implementing violent police actions which will endanger life**, such as pullbacks or interventions in the water.

## TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

### FUNDING AND POLICY

- The UK parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee or Public Accounts Committee must **conduct an inquiry into UK spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies, to establish how taxpayer's money has been used.
- The UK and French governments must **publish all contracts, financial data and monitoring processes related to spending at the border**, whether through the French government or private companies. This must include detailed accounts of how money is spent and how the impact of spending is monitored by the UK government.
- The UK and French governments must **release all policy, practice and operation documents that relate to securitisation of the border**.
- The UK and French governments must **create a monitoring framework based in international human rights law** to ensure any future policy and spending on border security does not contravene human rights.

### DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES

- The UK and French governments must **jointly publish regular data about those who have died and gone missing in the Channel and at the border**, including age, sex and nationality. The UK government should accept Nadia Whittome's proposed amendment to the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to ensure this provision.<sup>146</sup>
- The UK and French governments must **pause all security spending at the UK-France border until a statutory inquiry into the increase in violence and deaths since the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty is carried out**. This investigation should seek to establish how UK funding contributed to an increase in border-violence, including the rise in power of smugglers in response to heightened security and lack of safe routes

### RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE

- The UK and French governments must **create an independent cross-border reporting mechanism** which is not linked to law enforcement on either side of the Channel, to allow people to report instances of violence with confidence of being heard and action being taken.
- The UK and French governments must **offer dignified administrative and practical support to the families and friends of those who have died or gone missing** at the border.

146 - <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3929/stages/19774/amendments/10020845>

## BROADER SYSTEM CHANGE

### ENDING STATE VIOLENCE

- The UK and French governments must **work together to end the 'zero point of fixation' policy** (enacted by widespread violent evictions), **including ending UK funding** for these operations.
- The French and UK governments must **end racist and discriminatory police operations** in France, including but not limited to police interventions in transport networks and the random arrest and detention of individuals. **The UK must end funding** for these police operations.
- The UK and French governments must **end violent police interceptions of crossing attempts**, whether by small boat or lorry. **Both governments must end their funding** of these operations.

### ACCESS TO ASYLUM

- The UK and French governments must **end the 'one in, one out' scheme immediately and permanently and immediately return all those removed** to France.
- The UK government must **repeal the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and end the practice of criminalising people for arriving at the border**. This practice contravenes the UK's obligations under international law, and does not have the purported 'deterrence' effect. It should also **remove clauses 13-18 of the Border Security Asylum and Immigration Bill to prevent any further criminalisation** of people seeking safety.
- The UK government must **create safe and accessible routes to the UK for anyone seeking safety**. This must include restoring and improving access to family reunion and the creation of new safe routes. The process of developing safe routes must be advised by a group including experts by experience and NGOs.

## GLOSSARY

### **CALAIS**

Throughout this report, we use “Calais” to refer to Calais itself as well as areas close to the town such as Marck, Coquelles and Sangatte.

### **DUNKIRK**

Throughout this report, we use “Dunkirk” to refer to areas close to the coast east of Calais, including Loon-Plage and Grande-Synthe. Although this term is therefore used in a geographically imprecise way, this better reflects the way that people with lived experience of the border and the general public in the UK refer to this area of the border.

### **INFORMAL LIVING SITE**

Living sites which are not approved by government or local authorities and which are therefore precarious and materially vulnerable. Tents or abandoned buildings may offer a crude form of shelter in informal living sites.

### **JUNGLE**

The term ‘jungle’ has been used to designate various living sites around the UK-France border for decades. Although it was most famously used to refer to the “Big Jungle” or “Campe de la Lande” which existed from January 2015 - October 2016, it is still used to refer to any informal living site by many people.

### **SMUGGLER/AGENT**

This term is used to refer to people who organise irregular journeys across the Channel. This includes those who are present on the ground as well as those who are not present in northern France. This term is often used in quite a fluid way, and distinguishing between people who were involved in the organisation of crossings and those who may have been involved in other ways (such as being a boat ‘captain’) either in exchange for free passage or under coercion, is not always simple. However, since this is the term often used by people we spoke to in the course of this report, we have chosen to use this term.

### **HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery. It involves the recruitment or movement of people for the purpose of exploitation by means of force, fraud, coercion or deception. Men, women and children can be trafficked for various purposes, including forced and bonded labour, criminal exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriage or prostitution, and in extreme cases, organ harvesting.

### **UNACCOMPANIED CHILD(REN)**

Children (anyone under the age of 18) travelling without a parent or guardian. These people are sometimes referred to as unaccompanied minors.

### **BORDER REGIME**

A border regime is the comprehensive system of rules, procedures, and enforcement mechanisms that a state uses to control the movement of people, animals, and goods across its borders, widely characterised as areas of persistent, serious and systematic human rights violations.

**BORDER SECURITISATION**

The introduction and implementation of hostile border policy, practice and infrastructure to prevent 'irregular' migration framing it as a security threat. Securitisation of borders includes physical barriers such as walls and fences, surveillance such as cameras and drones, hostile police tactics and border pushbacks. These tactics drive an increase in death and harm in border spaces.

**MILITARISATION**

Border militarisation is the intensification of border security through the use of military tactics, technology, and personnel. It can involve the use of drones, barriers, militarised police units and military personnel resulting in the degradation of migrants rights characterised by policies of deterrence.

**SURVEILLANCE**

The monitoring of a country's border and border spaces to prevent irregular migration, including for use in assisting with the prosecution of and criminalisation of people on the move. It can include surveillance and information gathering by state and non-state actors, and the use of technologies such as cameras and drones. It may also include the extraction of personal data from documents, phones and social media.

**SAFE ROUTES**

Processes which allow people to safely travel from one country to another, particularly from a place where they are at risk to a safer country. We do not use the term safe and legal routes, since this implies that current journeys people make to cross the border are illegal. Despite the introduction of legislation by the UK government to attempt to criminalise these journeys, under international law it is never illegal for people to cross a border to seek asylum (see article 31 of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention).

**PERSON ON THE MOVE**

People or person on the move refers to people in northern France who are seeking to cross the UK-France border. These people are forced to move, not afforded stability, often unhoused and unable to settle.

**ASYLUM SEEKER**

An asylum-seeker is someone who is seeking international protection. Their request for refugee status, or complementary protection status, has yet to be processed, or they may not yet have requested asylum but they intend to do so.

**REFUGEE**

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

## APPENDIX: TIMELINE

This timeline spans the years 2018 - 2025. It details the extent of UK-France co-operation in recent years, including bilateral agreements and funding. It also tracks how, alongside this, violence and death at the border has increased, as well as the increase in evictions under the 'zero point of fixation' policy. It seeks to show the correlation between increased securitisation of the border, coupled with increasingly hostile political rhetoric and asylum policies on both sides of the channel, and the increase in death and injury at the border.

Entries relating to press statements, policy announcements or activities and evictions are a non-exhaustive list.

### NAMES OF THOSE WHO HAVE DIED AT THE BORDER

Names and information used was taken from Calais Migrant Solidarity - Deaths at the Calais Border, a record kept since 2002. Names are only published by CMS where consent has been obtained from relatives or friends.

### UK-FRANCE FUNDING OF BORDER SECURITISATION

Published figures on how much money the UK has given to France for border securitisation is not always clear. We have chosen to use the figures included in Unauthorised migration: Timeline and overview of UK-French co-operation, Melanie Gower, House of Commons Library, July 2025.

### EVICCTIONS

Available data highlighting the 'no points of fixation' policy characterised by frequent and widespread evictions of informal living sites in Calais and Dunkirk are taken from published information gathered by Human Rights Observers.<sup>147</sup>

### FAR RIGHT AND CIVILIAN VIOLENCE

Far right violence has been a recurring element of the situation at the border since at least the 2000s.<sup>148</sup> However, increasing levels of anti-migrant rhetoric in both the UK and France have led to a number of incidents in the last two years.

These often map onto domestic events such as elections (particularly France) and waves of far-right activity in the UK. Incidences of extreme civilian violence have also been common during this time period, linking to the political context.

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147 - <https://humanrightsobservers.org/monthly-observations/>

148 - <https://nobordertestblog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/english-dossier.pdf>

# "YOU CAN'T STAY BUT YOU CAN'T GO":

*State violence at the UK-France border*



Whether actively (through police violence) or through inaction (because people are neglected and left vulnerable to abuse and without safe routes to migrate and seek asylum), the UK and French governments are responsible for staggering levels of violence at the UK-France border.

Through the words of people who have experienced the violence of the border first hand, and the testimony of organisations working to support them, this report lays bare the extent of this violence and the devastating consequences it has on those who face it.

For years, the UK government has funded a proportion of this violence and instigated violent policies through bilateral agreements with France as part of their increasing border securitisation. This has led to death, disappearance, injury, psychological damage, and people trapped in a cycle of "can't stay, can't go".

It is time for the UK and France to use this co-operation and funding to support those seeking safety instead of harming them. Throughout this analysis, recommendations are made to both governments to support this shift.

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