

Decision-making, experiences, and aspirations of refugees and migrants along the Eastern Route through Djibouti

This infographic examines the journeys of more than 500 refugees and migrants moving through Djibouti. Using a longitudinal research design that included follow-up interviews approximately six months after an initial baseline interview, the data provide insights into how refugees' and migrants' movement intentions, exposure to abuse and hardships, and aspirations evolve along the Eastern Route.

METHODOLOGY

BASELINE

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION: In-person surveys

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD: May – June 2025

DATA COLLECTION SITES: Djibouti City: 251, Obock: 264

SAMPLE: 515 refugees and migrants

FOLLOW-UP

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION: Phone surveys

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD: September - October 2025

COUNTRY AND LOCATION AT TIME OF FOLLOW-UP

INTERVIEW: Djibouti (31): Djibouti City (21), Obock (8), Tadjourah

(2) **Saudi Arabia (10):** Jeddah(6), Riyadh(3), Al-Bahah (1)

Yemen (8): Aden (3), Sana'a (4), Other (1)

Ethiopia (22): Addis Ababa (11), Oromia City (4), Bati (2), Adama

(2), Bati (2), Dire Dawa (1), Gerba (1), Kombolcha (1)

SAMPLE: There was a 21% call-back success rate whereby 71 refugees and migrants were re-interviewed out of 346 interviewed for the baseline who consented to a follow-up survey.¹

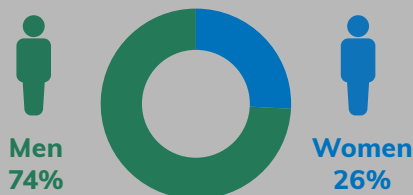
Background

- The Eastern Route to Yemen and the Gulf remains one of the world's busiest mixed movement routes, with over 100,000 people, mostly from Ethiopia, arriving in Yemen from the Horn of Africa annually.²
- Djibouti holds a strategic position along the route as the country from which the shortest maritime crossing to the Arabian Peninsula is possible, particularly from the coastal city of Obock. Between January and September 2025, 94,000 refugees and migrants departed from the coast of Obock, which represents a 23% increase over the entire 2024 (76,600).³
- The maritime crossing to the Arabian Peninsula represents one of the deadliest stages of the journey. Between January and September 2025, 890 deaths and disappearances were recorded, with drowning accounting for over a quarter of these tragedies.⁴
- Efforts to curb irregular movements in Djibouti, including arrests of smugglers and deportation of migrants and increased coast guard activity, have made mixed movements through Djibouti riskier, translating into higher smuggler fees and greater dangers for those making the attempt.⁵
- Djibouti is also an important host country for refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa. As of June 2025, UNHCR recorded 24,595 refugees and 9,159 asylum seekers in the country.⁶
- The land journey through Djibouti is marked by harsh desert conditions, which can lead to starvation, thirst, and death, especially in the summer.⁷

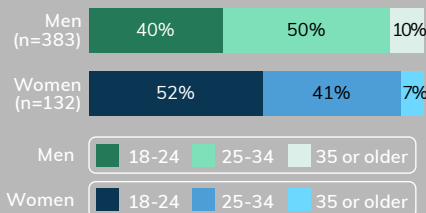
Respondents' profiles

Respondents interviewed at baseline (n=515)

Gender



Age



Nationality

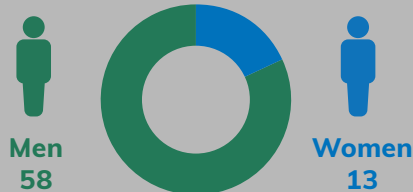
98% Ethiopians
2% Somalis, and **<1%** Yemenis

Legal Status

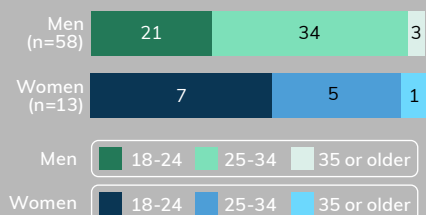
99% Irregular status
1% Asylum seeker or refugee

Respondents interviewed at follow-up (n=71)

Gender



Age



Nationality

70 Ethiopians
1 Somali

Legal Status

47 Irregular status
22 Citizen (Ethiopian Returnees)
2 Asylum seeker or refugee

Note: The 4Mi sample is purposive. Data presented in this infographic cannot be considered representative of the full population.

¹ It is possible that individuals who were not reached during the follow-up were unavailable because they had moved on or no longer had access to a phone due to various reasons including arrest, detention, falling victim to trafficking, or death. As a result, the percentage of those moving onward is likely an underestimate.

² MMC (August 2025) [Smuggling routes to and through Yemen: mapping journeys, remigration experiences, and onward movement intentions](#).

³ IOM (Dec 2025) [Migration Along the Eastern Route January – September 2025](#).

⁴ Ibid. See also [New York Times \(August 2025\) More than 60 Migrants Dead After Boat Capsizes Off the Coast of Yemen](#).

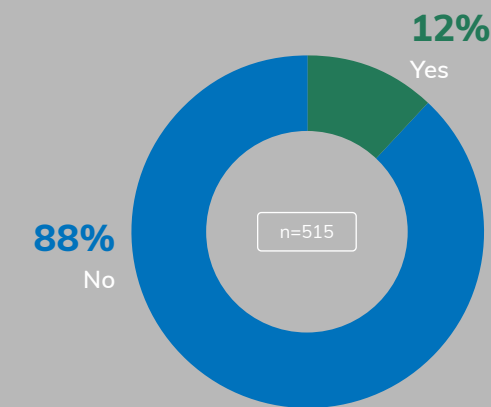
⁵ Ibid.

⁶ UNHCR (2025) [Djibouti Operational Overview](#).

⁷ ICRC (2023) [Djibouti: A journey of resilience and hope](#).

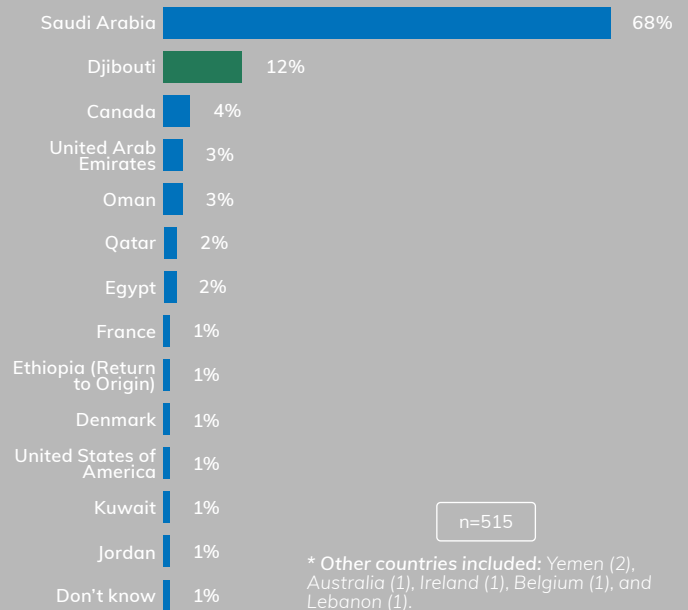
Tracking movements overtime

Have you reached the end of your journey?
Data from baseline

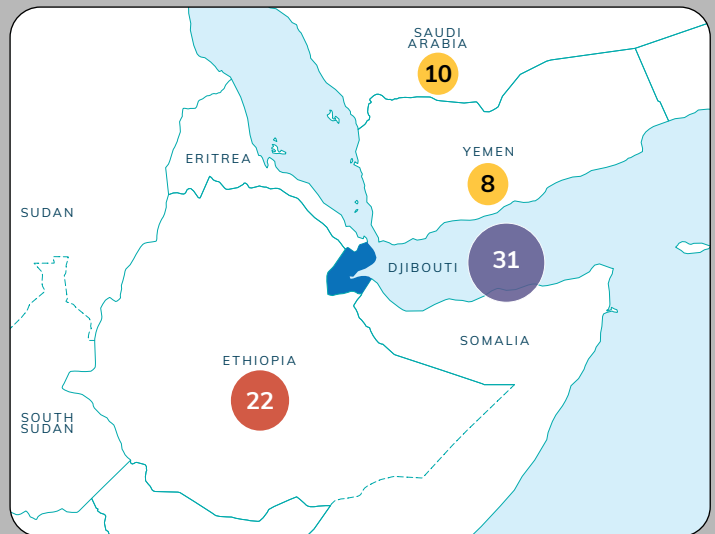


98%
Of the 452 respondents who intended to move onward said they would continue their journey even if they were delayed or faced challenges

What is your intended destination? Data from baseline



Respondents' movements after six months: Data from follow-up



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

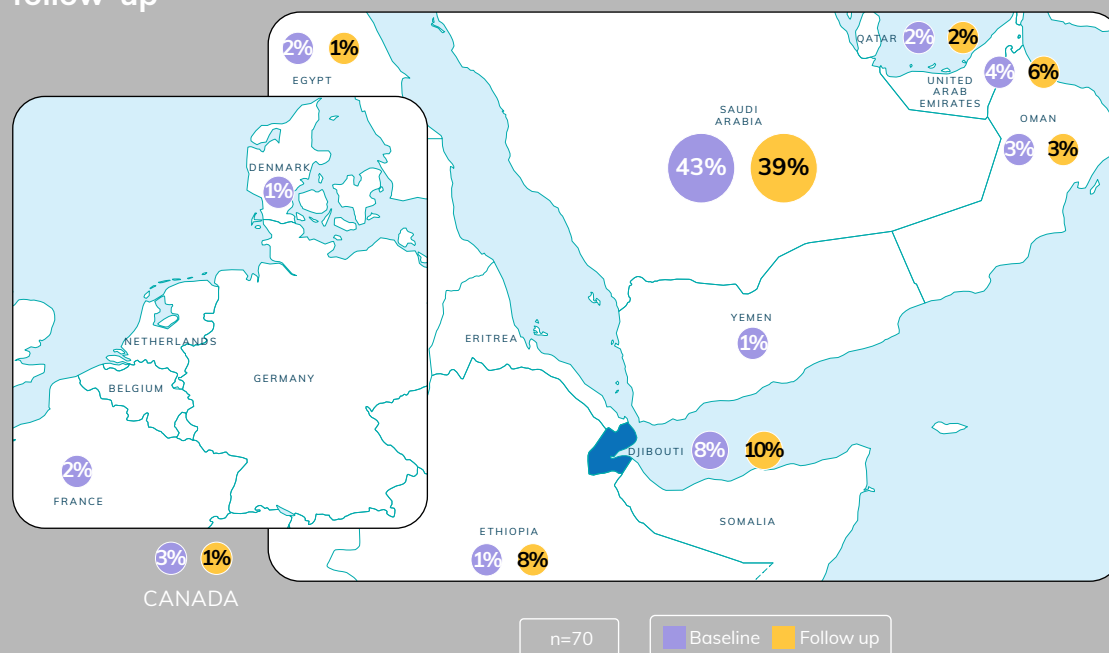
Key Findings

- Among those reinterviewed after six months, the majority (53 out of 71) had not reached their intended destination. Instead, 31 remained in Djibouti and 22 had returned to Ethiopia.⁸ This is despite the fact that most (88%) respondents had expressed the intention to move onward from Djibouti when interviewed at baseline. The **considerable level of returns and immobility suggests – though the sample size is limited – that many journeys are interrupted, delayed, or repeatedly stalled**, which is not often captured by research and reporting on the route. Mixed movement stakeholders in Obock and Djibouti Ville maintain that refugees and migrants, particularly children and youth, will sometimes journey to Obock without the funds to cross, in hopes that either their families will transfer the funds to smugglers when they arrive, or they will be able to work to raise funds for the next leg of the journey. When this does not occur, they are forced to return home to Ethiopia or decide to move to Djibouti Ville to find work.
- For those who moved onward after six months (18), 10 moved to Saudi Arabia and eight to Yemen. As just two respondents cited Yemen as their preferred destination at baseline, this indicates that **challenges encountered in Yemen can delay people's journeys**.

⁸ The survey tool does not ask people whether their return was forced, voluntary and assisted, or voluntary and spontaneous.

Destination aspirations six months later

What country is your preferred destination? Comparing responses from baseline and follow-up⁹



22
Changed their intended destination from baseline

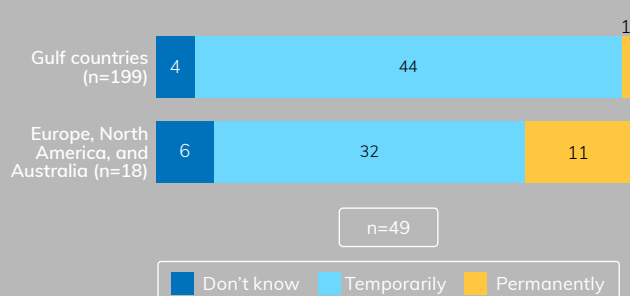
7
Reached their intended destination

10
Intended to remain in Djibouti

8
Intended to return to Ethiopia

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How long do you intend to stay at your destination? Data from follow-up¹⁰



*This question was not asked to the 22 respondents who had returned to Ethiopia.

Why have you changed your preferred destination? Data from follow-up



Key Findings

- **Large disconnect between mobility aspirations and reality.** Just seven of the 71 respondents had reached their original intended destinations, while the rest remained in transit (42) or returned to Ethiopia (22). That said, most of those in transit (28/42) and back in Ethiopia (19/22) still aspired to move.
- **Financial constraints are the main barriers for onward movement** cited by eight out of 22 respondents who had not moved between surveys.
- **Although respondents initially expressed fixed movement intentions, plans changed.** At baseline, 98% of respondents intended to continue their journey even if they experienced delays or challenges (page two). Six months later, 22 out of 71 respondents had changed their intended destination, 20 had changed their planned route, and 12 changed the length of time they intended to stay in their destination, mainly shifting to temporary movement intentions. These changes reflect the complex realities of the journey, where refugees and migrants face considerable challenges and uncertainties that force them to adapt their plans after they embark on their journey.
- **Evolving intentions.** Of the seven respondents who initially sought permanent moves to Canada (three) and Europe (four) at baseline, six had abandoned these plans by the follow-up and pivoted to temporary moves to the Gulf (three), remaining in Djibouti (one), and returning to Ethiopia (one). This reflects how barriers to longer-distance journeys can force a total recalibration of movement plans en route.

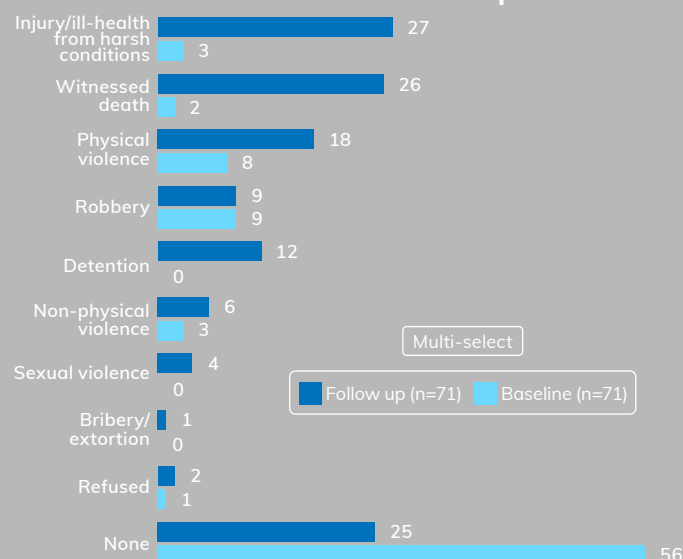
⁹ One respondent was unsure of their intended destination from the baseline but aspired for Saudi Arabia as a preferred destination in the follow-up. In addition, the initial intended destinations of those reached in the follow-up survey were similar to those not reached.

¹⁰ This question was not asked to the 22 respondents who had returned to Ethiopia.

Protection landscape along the Eastern Route

Have you personally experienced any of these types of abuses or harms on your journey?

Data from baseline and follow-up



14

had experienced some form of abuse or harm at baseline

44

had experienced some form of abuse or harm at follow-up

Zooming in on the protection experiences of those who moved onwards to the Gulf: Data from follow-up¹¹



Red Sea (n=8)

Risks: Injury or ill health

Perpetrators: Border guards/immigration officials



Yemen (n=15)

Risks: Injury or ill health, death and detention

Perpetrators: Border guards, armed groups, and criminal gangs

Specific locations: Aden, Dhamar, Ta'iz and Sanaa



Saudi Arabia (n=2)

Risks: Injury or ill health and death

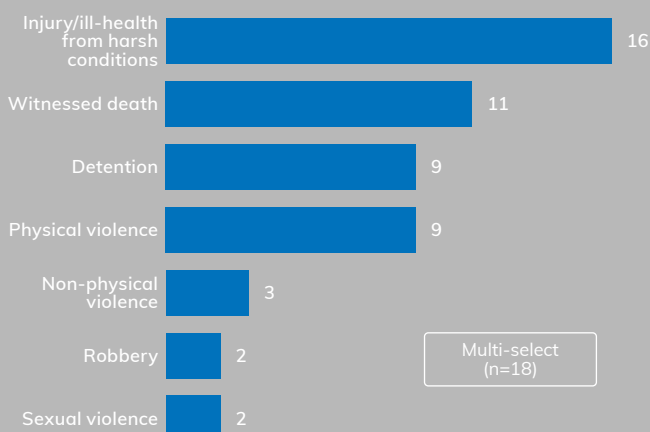
Perpetrators: Military/police and border guards

Specific locations: Riyadh, Dizan, and Jeddah



All 18

respondents who had moved onward to the Gulf had directly experienced abuse and harm, with each respondent experiencing an average of three types of incidents



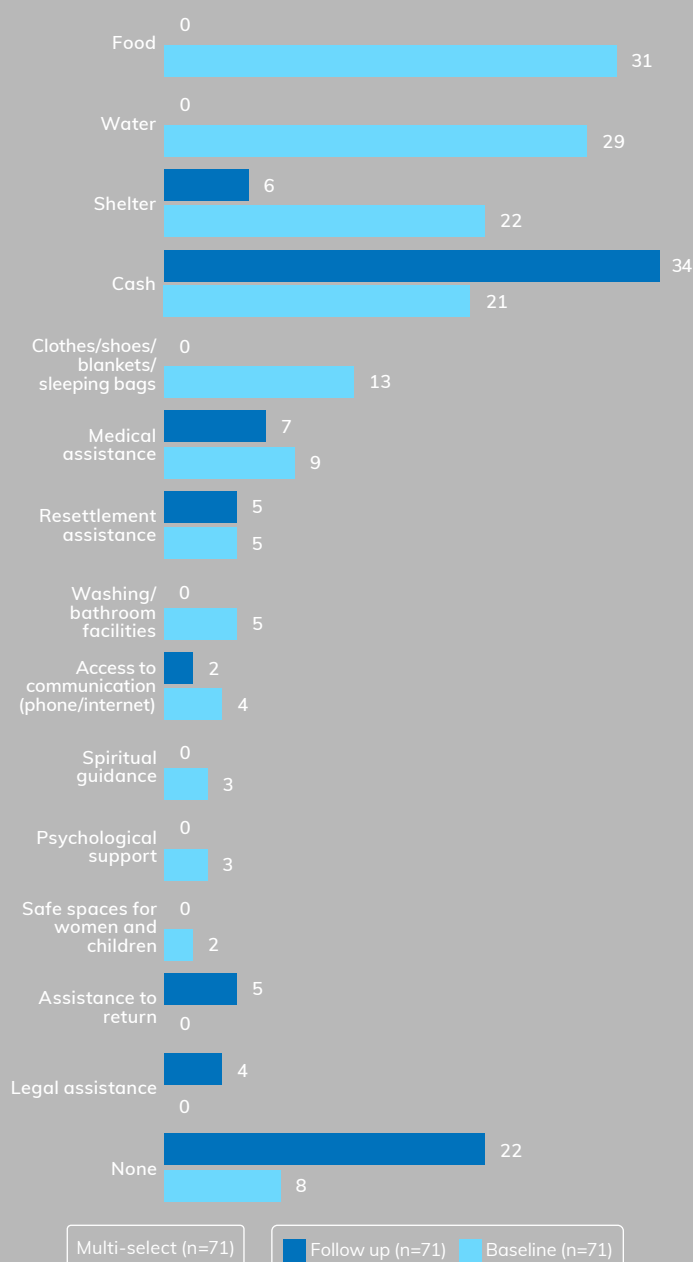
Key Findings

- Exposure to protection risks along the route through Djibouti escalates over time.** The number of respondents who had experienced some form of abuse or harm increased from 14 at baseline to 44 at follow-up and the severity of harm increased.
- The sea crossing and onward movement to the Gulf involves universal exposure to multiple abuses and harms.** All the 18 refugees and migrants who had moved onwards to Yemen and Saudi Arabia reported experiencing abuse and harm with each person reporting average of three different types of incidents.
- High adoption of safety strategies along the route.** 97% of all respondents interviewed at baseline employed one or more protective strategies along the journey, reflecting the prevalence of dangers along the route that necessitate adaptive behaviors. In particular, most (66%) travelled in groups to stay safe, whereas others sought to reduce their exposure to abuse and harm by travelling alone (19%) and avoiding carrying cash (18%). Although nearly all respondents applied safety measures, the high levels of abuse reported at follow-up indicate that individual strategies alone cannot offset the risks present along the route.

¹¹ The sample size of those who had moved to the Gulf is very small and should be treated with caution.

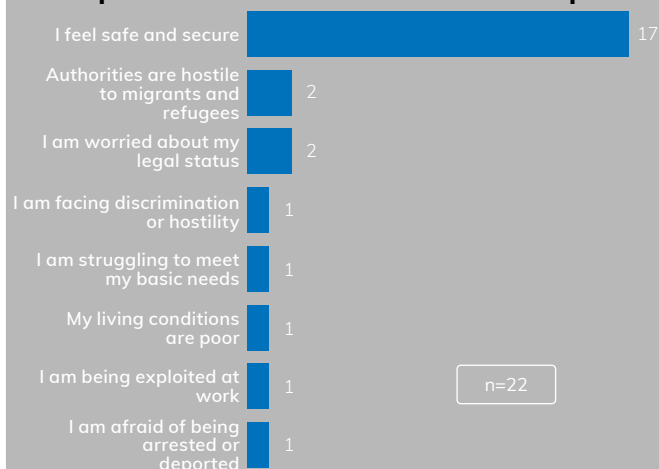
Current challenges and assistance needs

What kind of assistance do you need? Data from baseline and follow-up

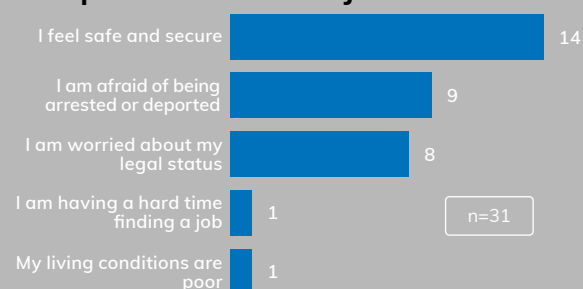


Which of the following best describes your life and the challenges you face? Data from follow-up

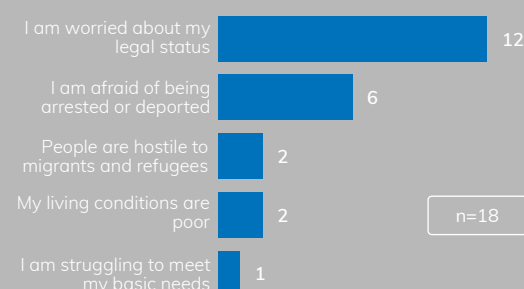
Respondents who returned to Ethiopia



Respondents still in Djibouti



Respondents who moved to Yemen and Saudi Arabia



Key Findings

- Needs shift overtime.** Although a large shift is noted across both baseline and follow-up in terms of food and water requirements and the broader need for assistance, respondents highlighted the need for cash assistance at follow-up (34 mentions), indicating growing financial exhaustion over time. Shelter needs also rose from baseline (six) to follow-up (22) suggesting increasing housing insecurity as refugees and migrants become stranded and their resources become depleted in transit locations.
- Declining needs amidst increasing abuse.** While the data on respondents' exposure to abuse and hardship reveals a steep increase overtime, particularly those who reached the Gulf (page four), somewhat surprisingly, their overall need for assistance declines (63 at baseline vs. 49 at follow-up). Having no assistance needs was observed irrespective of whether respondents had returned to Ethiopia (7/22), remained in Djibouti (8/31), or moved onward to the Gulf (7/18).
- Legal status remained a dominant source of stress and vulnerability in Djibouti and the Gulf.** Among those still in Djibouti (n=31), nine feared arrest or deportation and eight were concerned about legal status. Among those who had moved onward (n=18), legal status (12) and fear of arrest or deportation (six) were the key concerns raised. This aligns with the fact that four respondents expressed a need for legal assistance at follow-up (compared to none at baseline) and suggests that legal precarity remains a central concern shaping daily stress and decision making. Additionally, onward movement does not reduce hardship, instead, it often amplifies legal, social and economic insecurities.



4Mi data collection

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

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



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