



We Want to be **Safe.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The impact of violence against children
on the UK-France border in 2024**

2024 saw a **sharp increase in instances of police violence against children and a devastating rise in child fatalities on the UK-France border**. More children were killed in the last year than in the previous four years combined.

This report **embeds the voices of children throughout** to **examine the impacts** of these events on children, and to **recommend solutions** to ensure children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Project Play is an association which has been facilitating play sessions for children on the move in northern France since 2018. Working in informal living sites, safe houses and community centres, we meet children aged 0-18 and their families. Since 2018, we have worked with 7,735 children. We are the only organisation working specifically with children of all ages in this context.

Project Play's work focuses on children, and this report reflects that. This focus does not seek to diminish or undermine the experiences of adult men and women living on the UK-France border. All people have the right to life, to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment, and to live in dignity. We support the work of our partner organisations to advance access to rights for other demographics of people on the move living on the UK-France border.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors: Lily MacTaggart and Katie Hall, with Kate O'Neill

Illustration: Niamh Shaw

We thank in particular the children who shared their stories with us. Their contributions are anonymised and their names have been changed to protect their identities.

This report was a collaborative effort. Whilst Project Play encounters unaccompanied children, we do not provide specialised services for them. We thank Utopia 56, Medecins Sans Frontieres, ECPAT France and La Croix Rouge, whose contributions enabled us to explore the situation for all children on the border, even those who Project Play rarely encounters.

We thank the following partners for their support: Human Rights Observers, Secours Catholique Calais, Humans for Rights Network, Calais Migrant Solidarity, Alarmphone and Safe Passage.

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59140 DUNKERQUE

www.project-play.org

**No one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land.**

- "Home", Warsan Shire

For the Children Killed on the UK-France Border.

This report is dedicated to the children killed on the UK-France border. Each child was so much more than a number - they were all children, who played and laughed and cried. Each had a future ahead of them. Each deserved to live in safety and happiness.

Today, and every day, we remember them. We remember those whose names we know, and those whose names we don't. We remember:

Abadeh, 14

Abadeh and his older brother, Aysar, left their home in Deraa, Syria, in May 2023 in the hope of joining their brother who lived in the UK. Abadeh was a football fan, and loved to play. Both Abadeh and Aysar, 26, were killed on during a crossing attempt on the 14th January 2024.

Mohamed, 16

Mohamed was 16, from Deraa in Syria. He had been living with his family in Libya during the Syrian war. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 14th January 2024.

Roula, 7

Roula was born in Iraq in 2016, the little sister to three older brothers. She was travelling with her mother, father and brothers, who said she was the best in her class in school. Her mother was pregnant when Roula was killed during a crossing attempt on the 3rd March 2024.

Sara, 7

Sara was travelling with her mother, father and older sister and brother. Sara and her siblings had been born in Europe after her parents fled Iraq in 2010. Sara was killed during a crossing attempt on the 23rd April 2024.

Abdelaziz, 15

Abdelaziz was 15 and from Sudan. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 19th July 2024.



Mohammed, 10 months

Mohammed was 10 months old, from Libya, travelling with his family. He died in Calais as a result of health problems on the 29th July 2024.

Ishannullah, 16

Ishannullah was 16 and from Afghanistan. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 11th August 2024.

Sabila, 15

Sabila was from Eritrea, travelling alone. She was killed during a crossing attempt on the 3rd September 2024.

Five unknown children killed in one shipwreck on the 3rd September 2024.

We do not know the names or ages of these children. We believe they were from Eritrea.

Meri, three days

Meri was delivered when her mother had to undergo an emergency Caesarean after being involved in the shipwreck on the 3rd September 2024. Whilst her mother survived, Meri died in hospital at three days old.

Mansur, 2

Mansur, from Somalia, was travelling with his mother. He died in her arms during a crossing attempt on the 5th October 2024.

Maryam, 4 months

Maryam was born to a family from Iraqi Kurdistan, during their journey across Europe. She had two older siblings. She was killed during a crossing attempt on the 17th October 2024.

Salah, 16

Salah was from Somalia. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 30th October 2024.

We remember each of these children, killed in 2024, and every child killed on the UK-France border in the years before.





In memory of all those who have lost their lives at borders.

In solidarity with all those still risking theirs, the friends and families who grieve loved ones, and the survivors who deserved better.

In hope of a fairer world - in which safety is not a privilege for some, but a right for all.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report has been compiled by Project Play in response to the sharp increase in instances of police violence against children and devastating rise in child fatalities in 2024. More children were killed on the UK-France border last year than in the previous four years combined. In examining the impacts of this increased violence and fatalities on children, this report embeds the voices of children throughout, through the stories and testimonies they gave to Project Play's team.

“[The police] bring out the knives and pepper spray then guns. I was like... I’m only a child. Why are you doing this?... we want to be safe and that’s it.”

- Miel, 15, and Y*, 13, from Iraqi Kurdistan, who attended Project Play sessions in 2024*

This analysis locates children's experiences of violence in a policy landscape which has grown ever more hostile. Examining policy shifts, our own data and evidence provided to us by collaborating partners, we argue that political choices on both sides of the Channel have a direct and devastating impact on the human rights of children on the border, endangering their well-being and survival. This is reflected in no small part by the deaths of at least 15 children on the border in 2024.

“Did you know that there’s lots of Kurdish people buried here who died in a boat? I don’t want to die on a boat.”

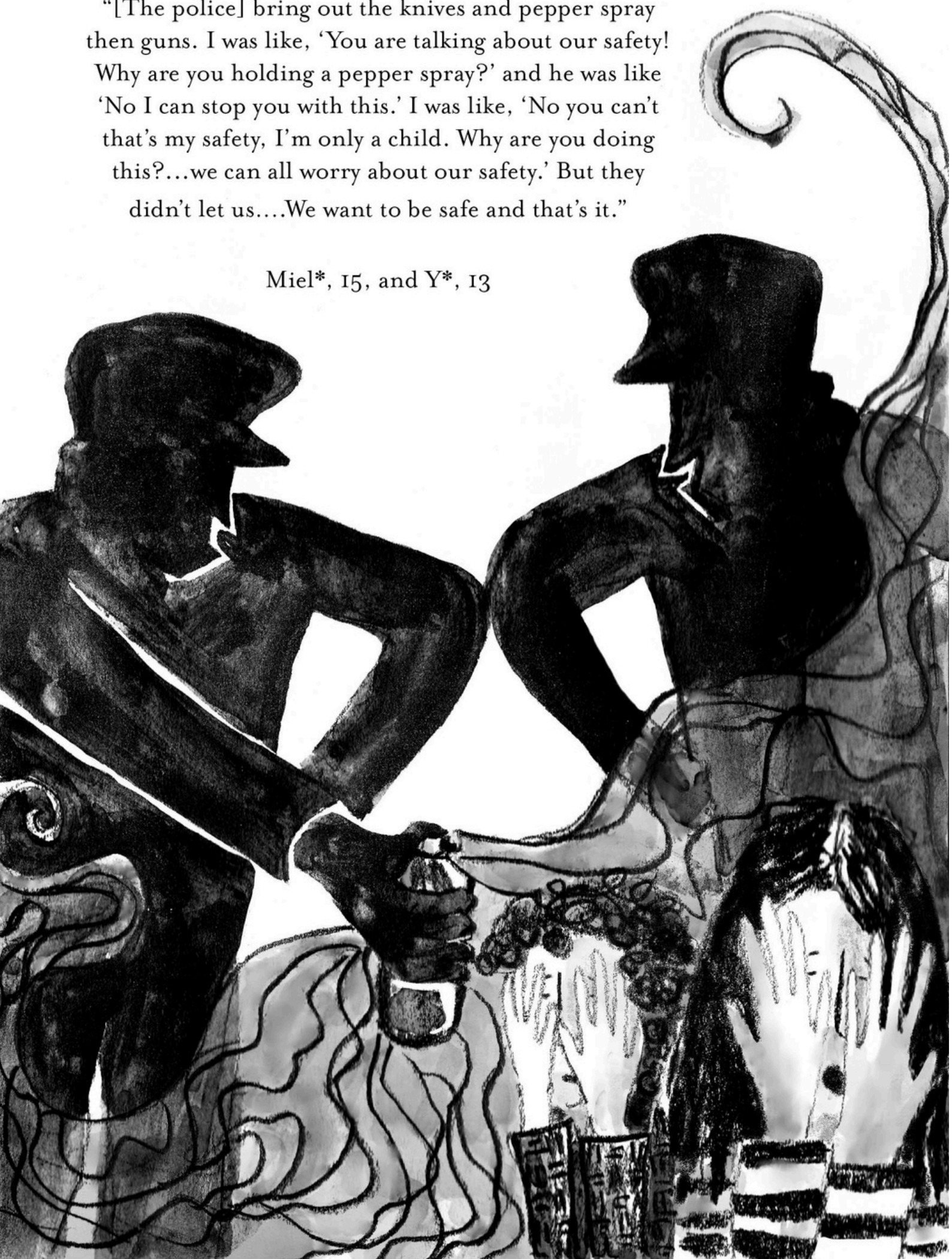
- J, 8, speaking to our team at a funeral for a baby killed during a crossing attempt.*

Section 1 (Context) explores the situation on the UK-France border, contextualised globally and situated in a European policy landscape which fails to ensure that those seeking safety can access it. While many who make the journey across the UK-France border go on to claim asylum, they first endure violent living conditions and deadly border crossings.

In 2024, 4,794 children made an irregular journey across the Channel. Since 2018, children have represented nearly one in five of those arriving in the UK via such routes, including many who travel unaccompanied. Despite the obligations of France and the UK under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), their focus on deterrent policies contravenes children's human rights - threatening children's wellbeing and, ultimately, their survival.

“[The police] bring out the knives and pepper spray then guns. I was like, ‘You are talking about our safety! Why are you holding a pepper spray?’ and he was like ‘No I can stop you with this.’ I was like, ‘No you can’t that’s my safety, I’m only a child. Why are you doing this?...we can all worry about our safety.’ But they didn’t let us....We want to be safe and that’s it.”

Miel*, 15, and Y*, 13



Section 2 (2024 - Deadly by Design) explores how policies pursued by the UK and France render the border an increasingly dangerous space for children. Despite record child fatalities in 2024 neither government keeps an official record of these deaths, prioritising violence and dehumanisation over dignity and human rights. This reflects broader European trends of deterrence, leaving children and families few alternatives but to risk their lives to reach safety.

Policy decisions on both sides of the Channel place children at risk of harm. Unaccompanied children are at disproportionate risk, for example, facing criminalisation as boat ‘captains’ and detention in adult prisons. Bilateral agreements have invested taxpayer money into border securitisation, funding harmful intelligence operations and violent police interventions. Under the guise of improving safety, these efforts have directly increased the risk of children experiencing violence, serious injury and death.

Section 3 (Violence in Living Sites) highlights how children living in informal sites in northern France face regular and violent police evictions, causing both physical and psychological harm. In 2024, half of Project Play’s sessions in Calais were disrupted by such operations. Unaccompanied minors were particularly vulnerable, frequently treated as adults and exposed to tear gas, rubber bullets and police violence. Constant police presence and surveillance heightened children’s anxiety and distress, often expressed through their play and behaviour.

Beyond the violence of evictions, the living conditions facing children on the move pose serious risks to their wellbeing. The French government’s failure to provide basic services leaves children, especially those with health conditions or disabilities, in situations of extreme vulnerability. In one case, a 10-month-old baby, Mohammed, died from health complications whilst unable to access care. These conditions compound the harms children experience daily and comprise structural violence in themselves.

Section 4 (The Violence of Crossing Attempts) examines the impact of irregular Channel crossings on children. These journeys are inherently dangerous, but intensified policing made them even more life-threatening in 2024, particularly for those travelling by small boat. Children faced risks of injury and death due to overcrowded vessels, crush injuries and police tactics, including the interception and destruction of boats. At least three children died from crush injuries in 2024.

Police use of tear gas and the stabbing of boats on beaches was frequent, further endangering children. Attempts to avoid such violence pushed families toward more remote and hazardous routes. 7-year-old Roula was killed in a canal 30 km from the coast in one such attempt. With safe routes to asylum largely inaccessible, many relied on intermediaries, who often posed additional risks. This was particularly true for unaccompanied children.

Children also suffered serious psychological harm from the trauma of repeated crossing attempts and constant police presence. Many expressed fear of the water, police and separation from family - fears evident in their behaviour and play. Authorities on both sides of the Channel failed to provide support or care following traumatic events, compounding harm. Families who lost children were often met with criminalisation rather than compassion - deepening the emotional toll of already devastating experiences.

Section 5 (Creating Change on the UK-France Border) concludes, summarising findings and recommendations. It is argued that **current policies governing the UK-France border are failing to respect and protect children's rights - instead exposing them to multiple sources of violence, compounding their experiences of trauma, and heightening their risk of death.**

An end to the violence facing children on the border and the prevention of future fatalities requires urgent, short-term and long-term policy change. Our recommendations:

URGENT

To prevent further loss of life, the governments of the UK and France should urgently:

- **Demonstrate cross-border accountability for incidents and fatalities in the Channel:**
 - Commit to life-saving operations, genuinely prioritising human life over surveillance.
 - Publish data on deaths in the Channel.
 - Improve support offered to shipwreck and failed crossing survivors.
- **End the criminalisation of people on the move:**
 - Reverse damaging legislation which criminalises those arriving irregularly, including small boat 'captains', who are often unaccompanied children.

SHORT-TERM

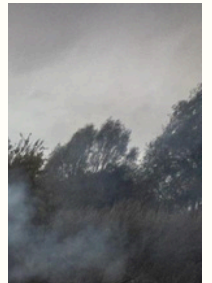
To end systemic violence against people on the move, including children, and the erosion of respect for human rights on the border, the governments of the UK and France must:

- **Put an end to state violence on the border:**
 - France must end evictions, interceptions and all forms of violence, reversing the 'Zero Point of Fixation' policy.
 - The UK must end the funding which enables such violence
- **Ensure safe and accessible routes to asylum are available for all those who need them:**
 - The UK government must create genuinely accessible safe routes to asylum in the UK.
 - The French government must create adapted asylum services in Calais and Dunkirk and improve information provision for those wishing to claim asylum in France.

LONG-TERM

Creating enduring change requires a shift from policies rooted in hostility to those which prioritise human rights. To achieve this, we urge the UK and France to:

- **Create genuine policies of welcome**, prioritising the dignity and human rights of people seeking safety in France and the UK.
- **Become European leaders** in championing human rights and ending hostility to migration, supporting collective change on a regional level.





Read the full report:

project-play.org/we-want-to-be-safe

Contact:

katie@project-play.org

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