

## Why fewer boats leaving the French coast doesn't lead to fewer deaths

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*'Stopping the boats' has been a political priority in Westminster since 2019, with various policies brought forward in the hopes of deterring crossings. After a record 45,755 arrivals in 2022, the UK agreed to provide France with €500 million between 2023-2026 to step up enforcement at its externalised border. This deal has just been renewed for 2026-2029, along with an additional €187 million reportedly tied to the number of departures the French prevent. However, our report highlights the mistaken assumption that fewer boats leaving the French coast led to fewer deaths. This briefing outlines our findings, alongside recommendations for policymakers seeking to address the persistence of small boat crossings while reducing risks to travellers.*

### About the research

Our report: [How 'stopping the boats' kills](#) presents findings from a year-long collaborative investigation by researchers at the ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures (Grant Ref ES/W002639/1), University of Bristol, and [Border Forensics](#), an independent research agency based in Geneva, Switzerland.

Drawing on data from migrant solidarity activists in northern France, French coastguard records, and UK Home Office transparency data, our investigation identified a dramatic surge in fatal incidents beginning Summer 2023. Crucially, this rise in deaths came as the numbers of dinghies and people arriving to the UK dropped significantly, and despite an increase in aerial surveillance and maritime search-and-rescue capacity.

### Small boat deaths and arrivals (2019-2025)

| Year | Small boat arrivals | Boats arrived | Annual arrival density | Dead and missing | Unique fatal incidents | Total confirmed deaths | Confirmed missing at sea | Reported missing at sea |
|------|---------------------|---------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2019 | 1843                | 164           | 11                     | 5                | 4                      | 5                      | 0                        | 0                       |
| 2020 | 8462                | 641           | 13                     | 10               | 5                      | 8                      | 0                        | 2                       |
| 2021 | 28,526              | 1034          | 27                     | 46               | 9                      | 33                     | 8                        | 5                       |
| 2022 | 45,755              | 1110          | 41                     | 7                | 3                      | 5                      | 2                        | 0                       |
| 2023 | 29,437              | 602           | 49                     | 17               | 6                      | 13                     | 2                        | 2                       |
| 2024 | 36,818              | 695           | 53                     | 83               | 22                     | 76                     | 2                        | 5                       |
| 2025 | 41,472              | 672           | 62                     | 29               | 20                     | 25                     | 0                        | 4                       |

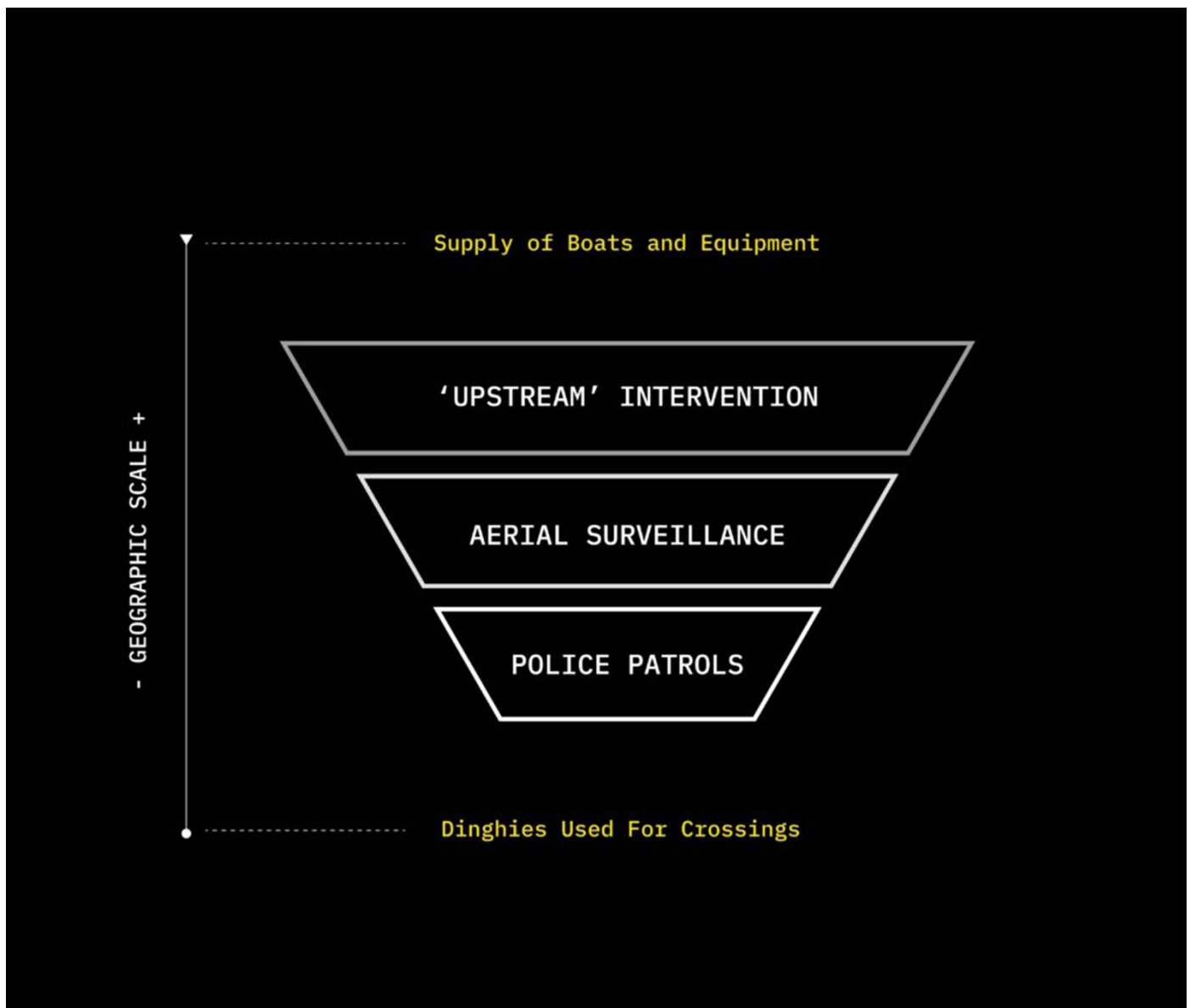
Policymakers claim to be committed to preventing the loss of life at the UK border. However, our findings show policies which focus on preventing departures have contributed to the circumstances which have made small boat crossings more deadly.

## Key Findings

At first glance 'stopping the boats' would logically entail stopping deaths - if departures are prevented, drownings cannot occur – but our evidence showed that attempts to block crossings have in fact increased risks for travellers.

Our report found:

- At an annual level there is **no clear correlation between the number of arrivals and the number of deaths**; an increase in crossings does not necessarily result in more fatalities. By contrast, **deaths are positively associated with overcrowding**, which has risen year on year.
- **Policies to prevent crossings have contributed to the trend of increasingly overcrowded dinghies.** Interventions targeting the supply-chains of equipment used for crossings, intensive aerial surveillance of the French coast, and increased police interceptions have reduced the number of crossings. With fewer dinghies reaching the French coast, the ones which do manage to leave take more passengers.



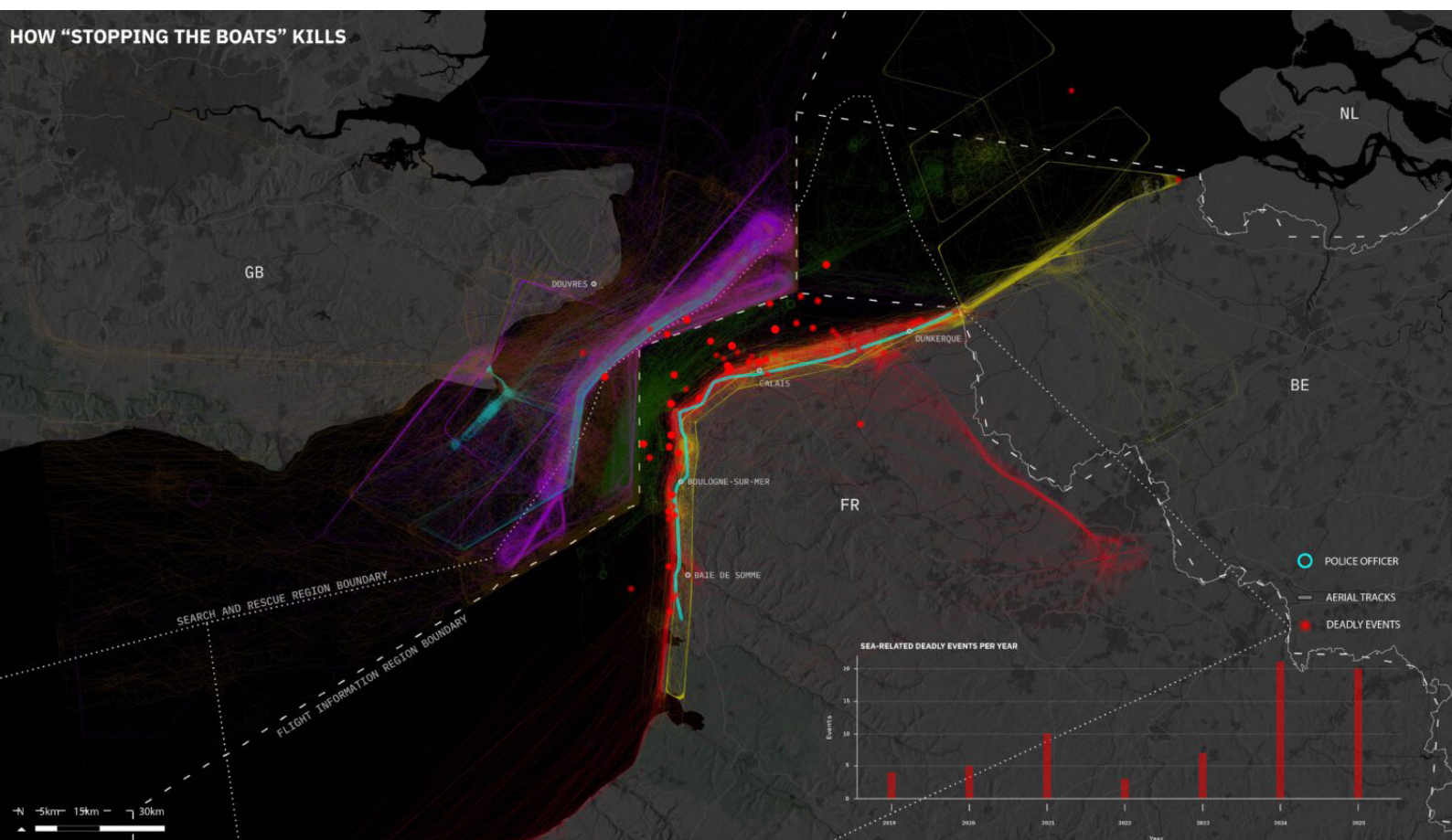
*Distribution of interventions disrupting small boat supply chains. Border Forensics, 2026.*

Beyond contributing to overcrowding, increased efforts from law enforcement to prevent crossings have created new dangers:

- **More surveillance to detect people preparing to depart from the beaches have led to new dangerous tactics such as the 'taxi boats'.** It has also made it impossible for under-resourced groups to organise their own journeys, provoking conflicts and further driving overcrowding.
- **Aggressive police interventions, and their use of riot control weapons,** has created chaotic launches in which panic amongst travellers has caused deadly crushes and dinghies departing underinflated. Police have also pierced dinghies with knives before departure, directly endangering passengers.
- **Anti-smuggling efforts to 'smash the gangs' have destabilised facilitator networks,** leading to more violence, while paradoxically tightening the hold of professional smugglers on the market for Channel crossings.

The Home Office's statistics may prevent policy makers from appreciating some of the impacts of prevention policies. Averages for the numbers of people per boat are derived from Home Office arrivals data and therefore may underestimate the actual passenger density. Our analysis of location data from the French coastguard has shown that **departure has become the deadliest moment of the journey**, uncovering a shift in where and how migrants are dying in the Channel: from occasional mass casualty shipwrecks further offshore to frequent crushes and drownings close to French beaches.

All images from the How 'Stopping the Boats' Kills Report can be found [here](#).



## Policy Recommendations

Efforts to prevent small boat crossings have intensified, yet crossings continue. Tying further funding in the new deal to the number of preventions will not stop them, but risks incentivising further violence and dangerous tactics from the French police. Policies that acknowledge the persistence of mobility, rather than assuming it can be stopped, are better positioned to channel movement into safer forms. These may include:

- 1) Reassessing the externalised model of the UK's border with Europe: Returning to a model where the UK's border exists on British soil would eliminate the need for people to undertake dangerous journeys. Expensive surveillance and search and rescue operations currently taking place in the Channel could be reduced, making potentially hundreds of millions of pounds available for domestic investment. Processing of new arrivals would also occur across sites where border controls are already present, making the current parallel locations for small boat arrivals in the Southeast redundant.
- 2) Reallocating current funding for boat crossings: Decades of investment and hundreds of millions of pounds have failed to reduce the numbers of people travelling irregularly to the UK but directly contributed to the emergence of the small boats route. The government currently funds French coastline security and police patrols. Reallocating this funding could instead improve the UK's asylum and immigration systems, for example to reduce reliance on expensive hotels for accommodation.

In the meantime, further research to understand the rise in border deaths is urgently needed. Publishing official transparency statistics of deaths at the UK border and commissioning an investigation by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration into the joint UK-France efforts to prevent small boat crossings would be welcome contributions from government.

### Further information

Full report: <https://www.borderforensics.org/investigations/channel/>

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