

STOWAWAYS PREVENTION & RESPONSIBILITY



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KEY POINTS...

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Stowaways have been a nuisance to the shipping industry that continues to plague companies and seafarers alike. Stowaways are people who secretly board a vessel or cargo container that is loaded onto a vessel without the consent of responsible authorities, and are detected while in transit(1). They incur many costs to companies including direct and indirect economic losses, time lost, and negative impacts on seafarers. Therefore, the industry has developed standard practices to prevent these unwanted boardings and to deal with stowaways once they are discovered (2).

The most recent set of comprehensive data on the issue published by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) shows that in 2017 there were 432 stowaway incidents reported involving 1,420 individual stowaways(3). Furthermore, in an academic study of 365 European and non-European seafarers, 39% had encountered stowaways in their career(4). It is clear that this issue is ongoing and common. In the year 2017 Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania were the top three countries of origin for stowaways, but the most common ports for stowaway boardings were Durban, South Africa and Lagos, Nigeria(5). This data implies that many stowaways are already immigrants in foreign countries when they board vessels. Additionally, US and Canada-bound vessels are most popular for stowaways(6).

Stowaways can board vessels in a number of ways despite the safeguards of restricting access to ports and guarding vessels, including boarding using fake IDs of maintenance workers or suppliers and then hiding, hiding in cargo containers before they are transported onto the vessel, and climbing into the vessel from the water using a rope or ladder(7). Once on board, stowaways try to remain hidden until they reach the vessel's destination, surviving on the food and water they were able to carry with them. If they are discovered during the journey, the crew are required to follow certain legal guidelines and standards in their treatment while on board, disembarking, and deportation to the home country(8). The full guidelines can be found through the IMO(9), and dealing with the issue properly can cost companies a hefty sum.

This cost comes in many forms, including the actual cost of deportation and fines, costs associated with potentially changing course and unexpectedly docking, feeding and clothing the stowaway, insurance premiums, and costs to the wellbeing of seafarers. Most vessels have insurance for the cost of a stowaway incident, which usually covers the monetary costs unless it is determined that the crew did not adequately prevent the boarding(10). One of the unseen costs may be to the seafarers themselves, 50% of whom report that a stowaway incident is a "high burden" and can be considered a traumatic event (11).

In 2017, the direct costs of stowaway incidents to insurance companies was \$9.5 million, which does not include deductibles, uninsured costs to ship owners, and unseen costs such as those to the mental health of seafarers(12). In reality, the cost to the industry is much higher. It is fair to say that despite prevention efforts, stowaways remain to be a problem for the industry that incurs high costs.





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So far, we have surveyed the current concerns and data regarding stowaways, but what is not being talked about in these discussions? What is left out? The people behind the title of stowaways. Who are they? What circumstances are they in? What has led them to embark on such a risky and dangerous journey? What other choices did they have? Why are these people not a larger part of the conversation? The literature is severely lacking in attention paid to the stowaways themselves, and all we really seem to know is that they may be choosing this option in order to leave a region of conflict, because of social or economic deprivation, or to find the opportunity for a better life. Some of them may qualify for asylum seeker status and could become refugees, and others would remain as undocumented migrants (13). However, these general sketches of the person who is a stowaway is pitifully lackluster.

We would like to interrogate some of the practices and assumptions regarding stowaways, reframe the issue, and bring up some of our own questions. Stowaways are part of a larger global system of informal migration. Other forms of informal or undocumented migration are traveling on foot, by car, and in smaller seaborne vessels. The current geopolitics of the world have created deep inequalities between countries, a system in which many feel their best chance of survival is to leave their homes, put themselves in great danger, and risk the chance to make it to a country that could provide better prospects for their future (14). This is the system in which stowaways have become a phenomenon.

By putting measures in place to prevent stowaways from boarding, the shipping industry is de-facto removing itself from the issue of irregular migration. The industry uses its own tools and resources to protect itself from involvement in this complicated global issue. But does that self-removal in effect shirk our social responsibility? Does “protecting” ourselves in effect forfeit our accountability? What would a conscientious response look like? Of course the shipping industry cannot be expected to transform into international activists and strive to solve issues of global inequality that create the conditions for undocumented migration, but what if the industry paid a bit more attention to the people behind the issue, the stowaways themselves? What if we invested in finding out who they are, what they've been through, and why this is their best option? What information would that provide us, and would it help us to contribute productively to this issue rather than simply removing ourselves? This paper is not providing any answer, rather questioning our current practices.



- 1 Yang-hong Chen, Shu-ling Chen, and Chien-hsing Wu, *The Impact of Stowaways and Illegal Migrants by Sea- a Case Study in Taiwan*, n.d.
- 2 “IMO Guidelines for the Unwanted Person Onboard-Stowaway,” *Marine Insight* (blog), May 16, 2019, <https://www.marineinsight.com/maritime-law/imo-guidelines-for-the-unwanted-person-onboard-stowaway/>.
- 3 “CONSIDERATION AND ANALYSIS OF REPORTS AND INFORMATION ON PERSONS RESCUED AT SEA AND STOWAWAYS” (International Maritime Organization, February 1, 2019), <http://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Facilitation/Stowaways/Documents/FAL%2043-13.pdf>.
- 4 Hans-Joachim Jensen and Marcus Oldenburg, “Potentially Traumatic Experiences of Seafarers,” *Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology* 14, no. 1 (December 2019): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12995-019-0238-9>.
- 5 “CONSIDERATION AND ANALYSIS OF REPORTS AND INFORMATION ON PERSONS RESCUED AT SEA AND STOWAWAYS.”
- 6 “Stowaways: The Hidden Problem at Sea,” *Ship Technology*, January 3, 2017, <https://www.ship-technology.com/features/featurestowaways-the-hidden-problem-at-sea-5708512/>.
- 7 “IMO Guidelines for the Unwanted Person Onboard-Stowaway.”
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- 9 “IMO Guidelines for the Unwanted Person Onboard-Stowaway.”
- 10 “Stowaways On Ships: Classification And On Board Measures,” *Marine Insight* (blog), May 1, 2019, <https://www.marineinsight.com/marine-safety/stowaways-on-ships/>.
- 11 Jensen and Oldenburg, “Potentially Traumatic Experiences of Seafarers.”
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- 13 “Stowaways On Ships.”
- 14 Demetrios G. Papademetriou Demetrios G. Papademetriou, “The Global Struggle with Illegal Migration: No End in Sight,” *migrationpolicy.org*, September 1, 2005, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/global-struggle-illegal-migration-no-end-in-sight>.

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