

# How smuggling really works: drivers, operations, and impacts

MMC Research Report,  
December 2025



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**Suggested citation:** MMC (2025) How smuggling really works: drivers, operations, and impacts.

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*This version of the report was reedited on 09/12/2025.*

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The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a knowledge centre engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programming on mixed migration. MMC has regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with a global team headquartered in Geneva and based in several countries worldwide.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

For more information, visit [mixedmigration.org](http://mixedmigration.org) and subscribe to the [MMC newsletter](#).

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### Front cover photo credit:

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Gao in Mali, 2009. Migrants on their way through the desert towards the border with Algeria, to try to get to Europe in search of a better life.

# Contents

<b>Key findings</b>	4
<b>Methodology</b>	5
<b>Limitations</b>	6
<b>Introduction</b>	7
<b>1. Drivers and motivations</b>	9
1.1 The decision to use smugglers	9
What influence do smugglers have over refugees and migrants' decisions?	9
What factors shape refugees and migrants' decisions to engage smugglers?	11
1.2 The decision to smuggle	13
What motivates smugglers to engage in this work?	13
How central is migrant smuggling to the livelihoods of those engaged in it?	15
<b>2. Operations and structures</b>	17
2.1 Prevalence	17
What is the prevalence of smuggling across different routes?	17
What is the role of policy in driving shifts in demand and routes?	21
2.2 Modus operandi	23
What activities are smugglers engaged in?	23
How do refugees and migrants first come into contact with smugglers?	25
2.3 Costs and payment terms	27
What are the typical costs involved in using smugglers and how do these vary?	27
What are the most prevalent payment methods, terms, and enforcement practices?	31
2.4 Corruption and collusion	35
What roles do state officials play in enabling or combatting smuggling?	35
<b>3. Impacts and outcomes</b>	39
3.1 Impact of anti-smuggling policies for smugglers	39
To what extent do smugglers experience enforcement actions, and with what consequences?	39
3.2 Risks for refugees and migrants	41
To what extent are refugees and migrants travelling with smugglers exposed to greater risks?	41
3.3 Migration outcomes	45
How do migrants perceive smugglers in retrospect?	45
How do smuggling experiences influence refugees and migrants' views of their journey?	47
<b>Conclusion</b>	49
<b>Recommendations</b>	50

# Key findings

## Drivers and motivations



- 1 A lack of legal migration pathways and recommendations from personal networks are key drivers in the decision to hire smugglers; coercion by smugglers is rare.
- 2 Smugglers seldom influence the decision to migrate, although once the decision to migrate is taken, they do shape the choice of routes and provide information about the journey.
- 3 Smugglers are primarily motivated by financial gain, although some cite a desire to help people on the move; most enter the work through social connections.
- 4 Smuggling is a major or main source of income for many, often outpacing other local income opportunities.

## Operations and structures



- 1 Smuggling is widespread globally but varies across routes. Refugees and migrants more commonly use smugglers when faced with longer and perilous journeys, in particular involving maritime crossings.
- 2 The use of smugglers is more likely for those driven to flee by insecurity, conflict, or limited rights and freedoms.
- 3 Most clients are referred to smugglers by family or friends or initiate contact themselves; direct approaches by smugglers are rare, but correlate with greater risks.
- 4 Stricter border controls both increase the demand for smuggling and contribute to shifts in routes, as smuggling networks adapt to circumvent enhanced enforcement.
- 5 Increased risks posed by stricter border controls also contribute to rising fees, although costs vary widely by route. Smugglers often require at least partial pre-payment, and may use detention to enforce payment.
- 6 State officials are frequently complicit in smuggling operations, often in exchange for a fee. This complicity contributes to the risks faced by refugees and migrants.

## Impacts and outcomes



- 1 Many smugglers operate with relative impunity; even when arrested, detention is often avoided or cut short through bribery.
- 2 Those who use smugglers face greater risks, partly because they travel along more dangerous routes. Yet statistical modelling shows that smuggler use itself is strongly linked to a higher likelihood of experiencing incidents during the journey, regardless of route or other factors.
- 3 Smugglers are seen by refugees and migrants both as perpetrators of harm and as essential sources of protection; this reflects their dual role in facilitating migration and, at times, endangering people on the move.
- 4 Most smuggler users feel their goals were achieved with smugglers' help, though opinions are split on whether smugglers were honest about the risks involved.
- 5 Smuggler users have more negative perceptions of migration than those who did not use smugglers, likely reflecting more complex and perilous journeys which prompted their initial decision to use smugglers.

# Methodology

## Core migrant survey:

4Mi's main tool is the core migrant survey, which offers rich and detailed insight into the profiles, journeys, and experiences of people on the move.

Over 80,000 survey interviews have been conducted with people on the move globally between November 2019 and June 2025. Most of these interviews have been conducted face-to-face, except in the case of security restrictions and during the Covid-19 pandemic, when data collection was conducted predominantly over the phone.

The core migrant survey includes questions on respondents' profiles, drivers, destination intentions, protection issues, financing, access to information, assistance needs, and interaction with smugglers. Those who indicate having used a smuggler – a total of 50,203 respondents – are asked about services provided, payment methods, and perceptions of their experience.

## Smuggling module:

4Mi's innovative and flexible set up enables the core migrant survey to be complemented by additional modules on specific themes. This has included a specific smuggling module, implemented with 13,886 migrants who used smugglers in thirteen countries (see map) since April 2021. The smuggling module delves deeper into the topic, exploring interactions between migrants and smugglers and gathering more detailed insights into migrants' experiences.

## Smuggler survey:

Alongside the core migrant survey and associated smuggling module, MMC has also developed a standardised smuggler survey as part of the 4Mi data collection programme.

To date, a total of 458 interviews have been conducted with smugglers in West and North Africa in two rounds of data collection.

Enumerators contacted smugglers predominantly through referrals, mostly from friends and acquaintances, other smugglers, or community leaders; some enumerators were also able to recruit smugglers directly in the neighbourhoods in which they were operating, or through other means including social media.

# Limitations

4Mi targets a very diverse, hard-to-reach, and highly mobile population, which means data collection relies on non-probability sampling techniques such as purposive and snowball sampling. Due to the non-random nature of sampling, the main limitation of 4Mi data is therefore its lack of representativity: the data cannot be generalised to the overall migrant population. However, given the volume of data collected, it nonetheless offers invaluable insight into mixed migration dynamics.

This is the case, also, for the smuggler survey: reaching and interviewing 458 smugglers is no mean achievement. This includes 56 women, ensuring their experiences are also featured in the dataset. However, the relatively small sample of women surveyed precludes useful gender disaggregation. Moreover, the smuggler survey was conducted only in West and North Africa: smuggler data should therefore be interpreted solely with reference to that specific context, and findings should not be extrapolated to other regions.

## Photo credit:

© Amanda Nero/IOM, 2016

A truck packed with migrants heading to Libya crosses Agadez on its way to Touryat, a Nigerien village.



# Introduction

Restricted access to regular migration pathways by people seeking better opportunities, rights, or safety abroad continue to fuel strong demand for irregular alternatives: in the absence of accessible legal channels for migration, migrant smuggling keeps thriving as smugglers step in to respond to the demand for irregular migration.

**“ With a thousand shivers of fear, we chose the smuggling route, because the possibility of dying is very high. ”**  
**24-year-old Afghan man in Türkiye**

Counter smuggling policies/operations and tightened border controls have sought to target the supply of smuggling services, only for smuggling networks to develop new and often more dangerous routes in response to continued demand. Meanwhile, efforts to reduce demand by financing development assistance (“addressing the so-called root causes of migration”) in countries of origin or sensitising people on the move to the risks of irregular movement have been largely ineffective in the face of persistent factors such as economic instability, conflict, and persecution that drive people out of their countries of origin, as well as sustained demand for migrant labour and family connections that drive people towards destination countries.

In 2023, the European Commission said migrant smuggling had never been so profitable or so deadly — despite a decade of policies and so-called action plans to crush the trade. “Break the business model of smugglers” and “smash the gangs” have become common policy slogans. Yet, migrant smuggling continues to thrive.

The failure to effectively addressing migrant smuggling is due both to an excessive focus on the supply side (the smugglers) - which fails to constructively address the demand for irregular migration - and to the simplistic and persistent narratives and myths that surround it – whether due to lack of data, or a political unwillingness to use existing data and evidence.

To contribute to a better understanding of migrant smuggling and support the development of more effective, people-centred, evidence-based policies and responses, this landmark report draws upon all data collected on migrant smuggling by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) since 2019. This includes over 80,000 interviews with people on the move along key mixed migration routes worldwide but also, uniquely, more than 450 interviews with smugglers in West and North Africa. This provides an accessible evidence-base that explains how smuggling really works - one that cannot and should not be ignored.

The subsequent pages examine the drivers and motivations, operations and structure, as well as impacts and outcomes of migrant smuggling and anti-smuggling policies as experienced by people on the move and articulated by smugglers, and how these intersect across different routes and demographic profiles. It will answer the following key questions.

**What are the drivers and motivations, operations and structures, as well as impacts and outcomes of migrant smuggling and anti-smuggling policies as experienced by people on the move and articulated by smugglers? And how do these intersect across different routes and demographic profiles?**

## Drivers and Motivations



- What factors shape refugees and migrants' decisions to engage smugglers?
- What influence do smugglers have over refugees and migrants' decisions?
- What motivates smugglers to engage in this work?
- How central is migrant smuggling to the livelihoods of those engaged in it?

## Operations and Structures



- What is the prevalence of smuggling across different routes?
- What is the role of policy in driving shifts in demand and routes?
- What activities are smugglers engaged in?
- What are the typical costs involved in using smugglers and how do these vary?
- What are the most prevalent payment methods, terms, and enforcement practices?
- What roles do state officials play in enabling or combatting smuggling?

## Impacts and Outcomes



- To what extent do smugglers experience enforcement actions and with what consequences?
- What risks and harms do migrants experience while using smugglers, and are they at greater risk?
- Are smugglers a source of risk or protection?
- How do migrants perceive the role and value of smugglers in retrospect?
- How do smuggling experiences influence migrants' views of their journey?

While all data in this report are self-reported, including by individuals engaged in illicit activities, appropriate caution has been applied in interpretation. In particular, information provided by smugglers has been carefully assessed and triangulated with survey responses from people on the move to mitigate potential bias or self-presentation effects.

## Terminology

**Mixed migration** refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. People engaged in mixed migration are motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, have a range of legal statuses and a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Mixed migration describes refugees and migrants travelling along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.

MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms '**smuggler**' and '**smuggling**', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants' definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences.

# 1. Drivers and motivations

## 1.1 The decision to use smugglers

### What influence do smugglers have over refugees and migrants' decisions?

An enduring myth about migrant smuggling concerns the role of smugglers in instigating irregular migration. In fact, **just 6% of all smuggler users surveyed globally identified smugglers as a key influence in their decision to migrate**. And as illustrated on the next page, only a tiny minority of smuggler users feel pressured by smugglers into using their services.

**“ Prior the journey we were showed green gardens by the smuggler. He said the whole journey from Afghanistan to Greece would be mostly by car or truck, but when we got started, things were the opposite. The journey took two months and most of the journey was on foot. ”**

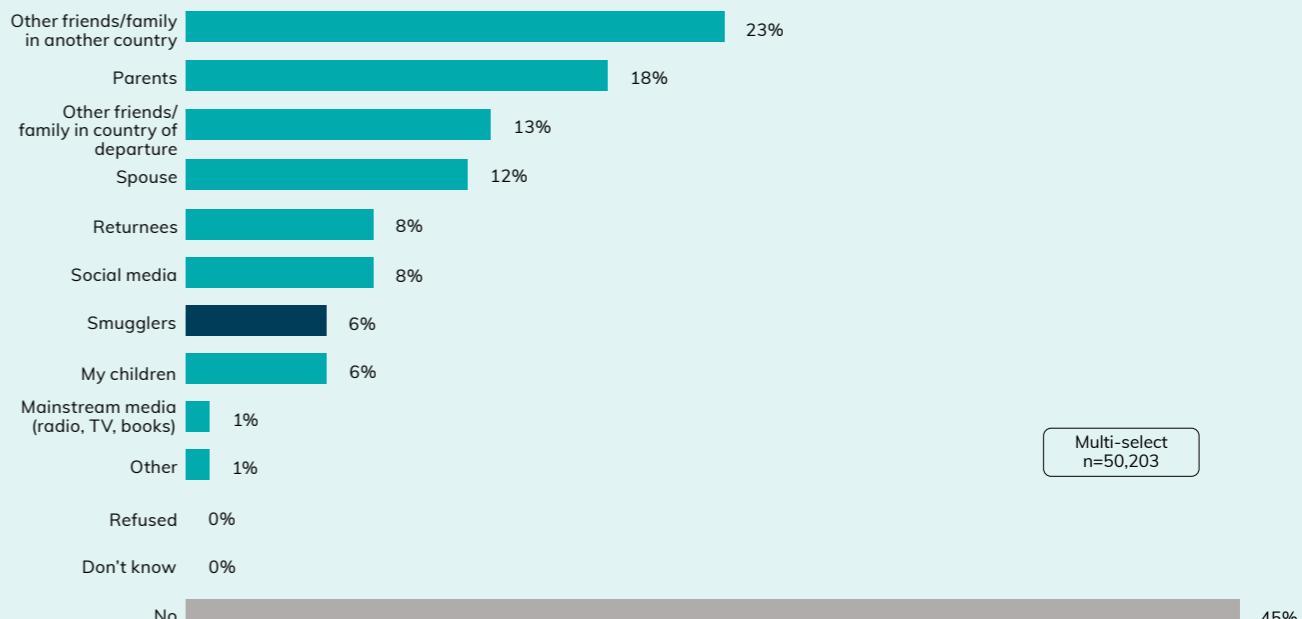
**22-year-old Afghan man in Greece**

Once the decision to migrate is taken – **usually alone (45%) or influenced by family and friends (23%)** – smugglers do play an important role in informing migrants about the journey ahead: nearly a quarter (24%) of all smuggler users received information from smugglers before their journey. During the journey, this increased to 30%, suggesting that the role of smugglers as a source of information increases along journeys. Although this information may at times constitute a form of ‘false advertising’ – designed to influence pre departure decision-making – and contribute to mis-information while people are on the move- smugglers were in fact considered the second most reliable source of information overall among smuggler users who accessed information before or during their journey.

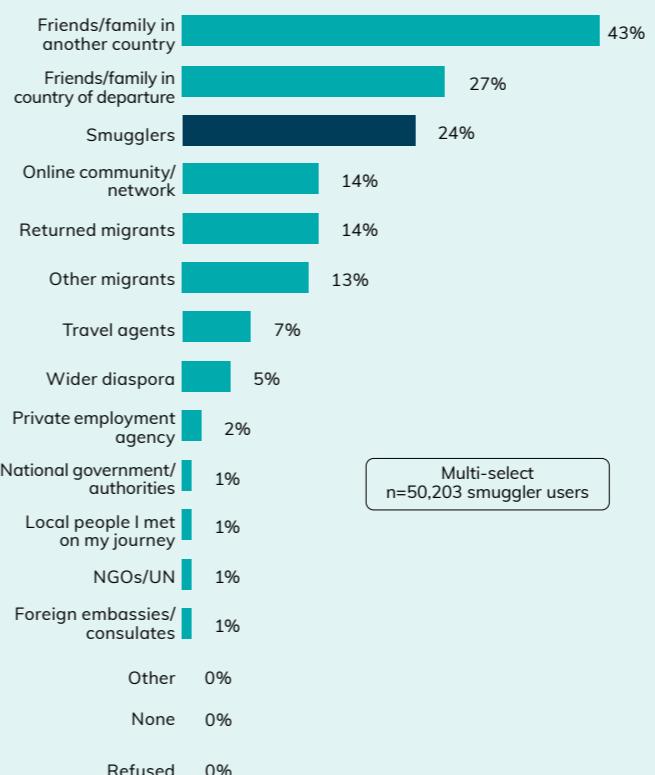
### Migrant data in focus

These graphs draw upon data collected among over 80,000 people on the move between 2019 and 2025. Throughout this report, graphs based on data collected among migrants will be presented in light cyan blue boxes, to differentiate them from graphs based on data collected among smugglers.

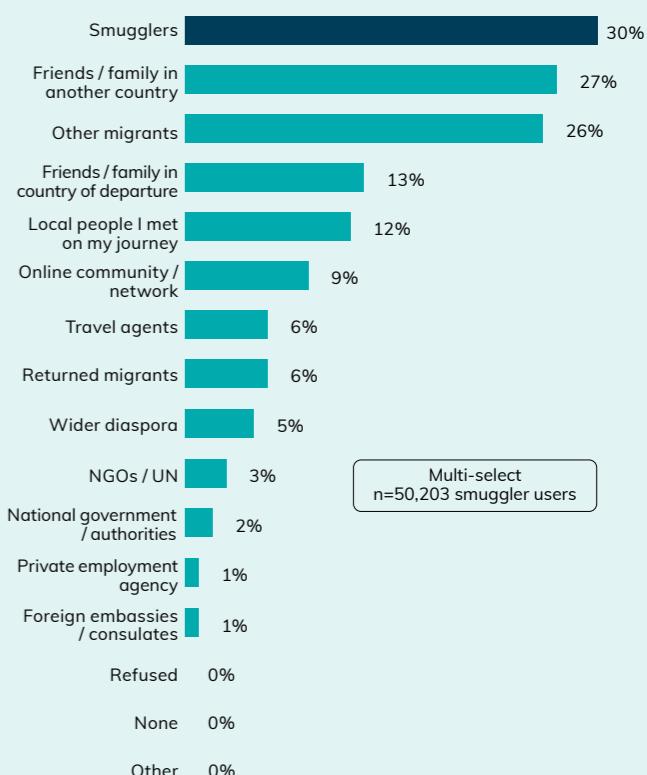
**Did anyone or anything influence your decision to migrate? (multi-select when ‘No’ is not selected)**



**What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your journey?**



**What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. during your journey?**



## What factors shape refugees and migrants' decisions to engage smugglers?

**People are driven to irregularity by the lack of regular pathways for migration. In the absence of accessible opportunities for legal migration,** refugees and migrants resort to smugglers predominantly because they think it will be easier (44%), and because they know of no alternatives (39%). Recommendations from family and friends both in the diaspora and in the country of departure also play an important role in the decision to use a smuggler, especially among women. Conversely, as discussed on the previous page, just 3% felt smugglers pressured them into using their services.

**“Smugglers charge people a lot of money to get them to their destination countries. If governments provided safe migration, people would go to safe places legally without having to take many risks.”**

**56-year-old Afghan man in Pakistan**

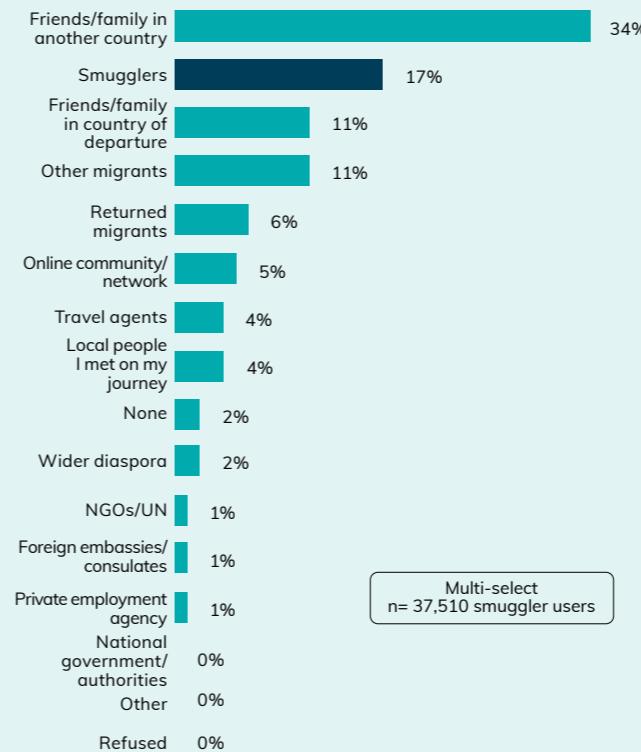
**“With a thousand shivers of fear, we chose the smuggling route, because the possibility of dying is very high.”**

**24-year-old Afghan man in Türkiye**

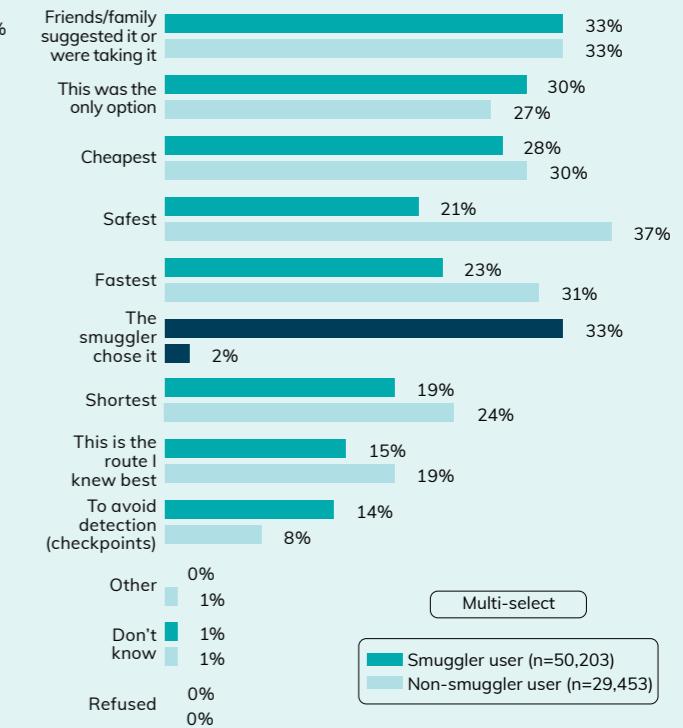


## Migrant data in focus

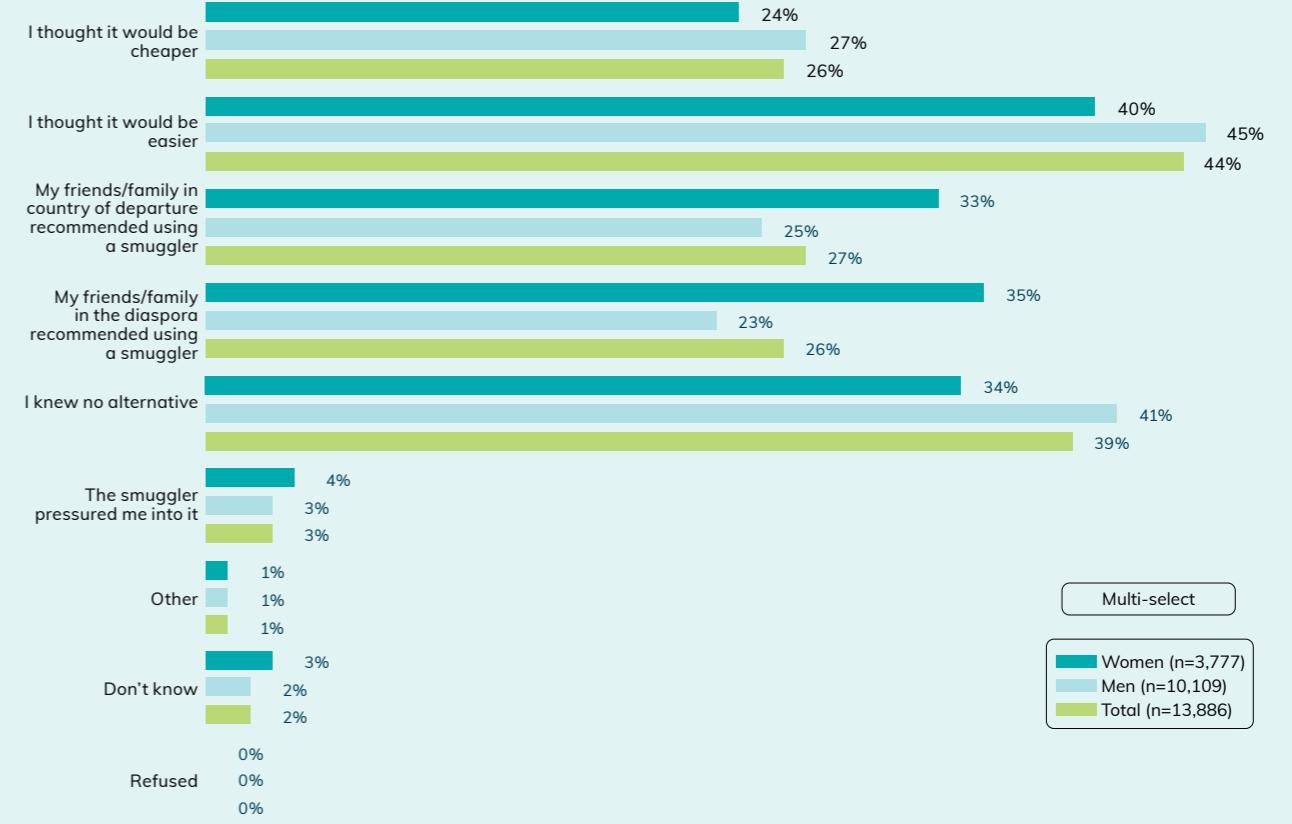
### Of all sources, what has been the most reliable source of information overall?



### Why did you take this route? By smuggler use



### Smuggling module: Why did you use the services of a smuggler? By gender and overall



## 1.2 The decision to smuggle

### What motivates smugglers to engage in this work?

**Reasons to engage in migrant smuggling are first and foremost financial.** Among smugglers surveyed, 61% started working in smuggling to make extra money, and a further 49% noted it was better paid compared to other jobs. Smugglers' quotes suggest a wide spectrum of financial motives, ranging from making ends meet to the pursuit of personal profit.

“ At first, I was just a driver, and I earned money from that. But then I suffered major losses — bandits robbed me twice, and I lost all my income. I had no other choice but to take the risk of getting involved in transporting migrants. ”

Smuggler

“ I sell inside the bus station — I have a small cigarette stand and I make coffee. But for some time now, I realised I wasn't earning enough from my small business because there weren't many clients anymore. So, I decided, together with a friend who's a driver's apprentice, to get into migrant smuggling. Honestly, I'm making good money now. ”

Smuggler

“ The work of smuggler brings more money than many. It's a risky job, but we're doing very well. ”

Smuggler

“ A friend of mine was doing this work and making a good living. He explained to me how he did it, so I thought, why not me too? That's how I got involved — because you can make a lot of money without putting in much effort. ”

Smuggler

“ I saw smuggling as a fast-cash business, so I trained and started building connections. ”

Smuggler

**Almost half of smugglers did mention a desire to help migrants in need**, though often in combination with other factors. Whether this reported altruism is genuine, perhaps inspired by smugglers' own experiences of migration or desire to help family and friends, or stems from a need to justify the profits above-mentioned is sometimes ambiguous.

“ It was my passion to help migrants fulfil their dreams, that's why my fees are affordable. ”

Female smuggler

“ I got involved because of the suffering of young Africans, and because of Europeans who believe Africans don't have the right to a life of luxury like them. ”

Smuggler

“ This work pleases me personally. I see it as a sacrifice to help my migrant brothers and sisters. It's true that we earn a lot of money, but it's also a risky job. ”

Smuggler

“ I really wanted to help my migrant brothers who were seriously struggling during their journey, because I've always been a naturally altruistic person. ”

Smuggler

“ For me, our work is humanitarian. It's about solidarity and mutual aid. We often save lives, and that's why everyone values what we do. ”

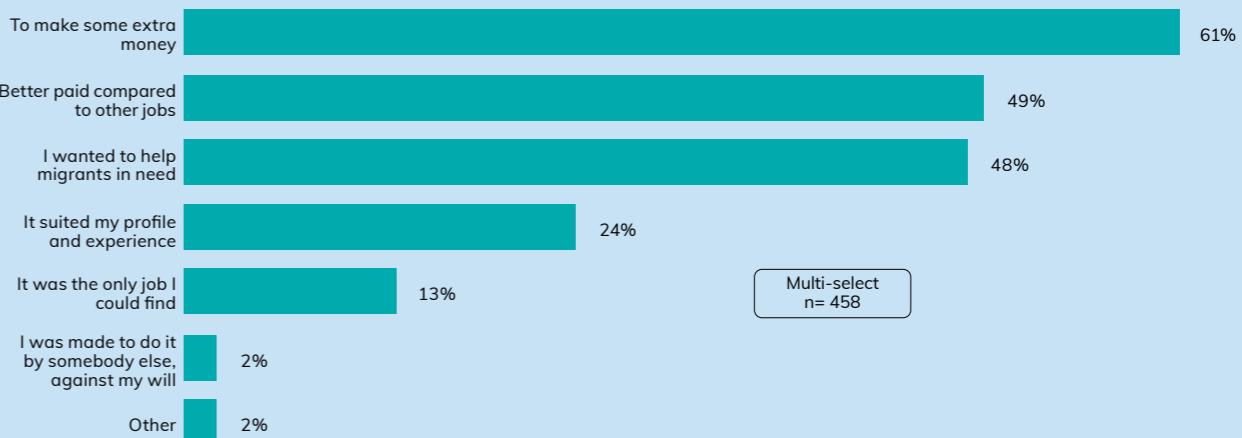
Smuggler

**Most of the smugglers surveyed got involved after being offered work in the smuggling business, most commonly by a friend.** Others did not wait for such an opportunity to present itself, either approaching a smuggler or starting independently. A few were asked for help directly from migrants.

### Smuggler data in focus

These graphs draw upon 458 interviews conducted with smugglers in West and North Africa between May and October 2021 and between December 2024 and March 2025. Throughout this report, graphs based on data collected among smugglers will be presented in blue boxes, to differentiate them from graphs based on data collected among migrants.

#### What were the primary reasons you started working in migrant smuggling?



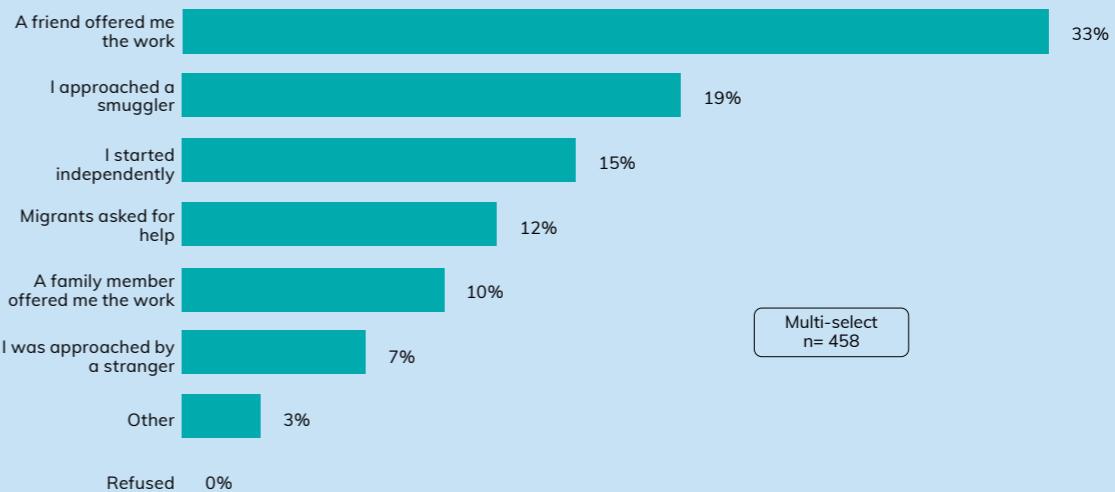
“ I was working as a car mechanic, but I wasn't earning much. Then a close friend introduced me to this smuggling work, which I'm now doing to make more money. ”

Smuggler

“ I was once a migrant on the same route. I saw how much money smugglers were making, and I calculated the risk I might face if I entered this business. So, I decided to help migrants and earn some extra income to support my family. ”

Smuggler

#### How did you start working in migrant smuggling?



“ Others around us did it in ways we didn't like. They would extort money from migrants and then abandon them... My husband was determined to give them a helping hand, and it became his full-time job. ”

Female smuggler

## How central is migrant smuggling to the livelihoods of those engaged in it?

**Over two thirds of smugglers surveyed report that smuggling is either the main (22%) or an important (45%) source of income in the local community where they work.** The centrality of smuggling as a livelihood is most widely reported among smugglers in North Africa (n=258) where most smugglers were migrants themselves and 29% of whom see smuggling as the main source of income for their local community, in addition to 45% who perceive it as an important source of income.

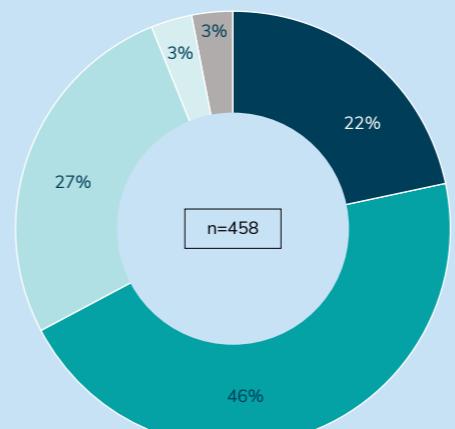
**More than half of all smugglers find that the importance of smuggling as a source of income for the local community has increased compared to a year ago.** This was particularly the case in West Africa, where 63% of smugglers surveyed perceived smuggling to have gained importance as a source of income in the year prior to data collection.

Although the vast majority of smugglers surveyed had a previous history of employment, often in small business or transportation, **42% did not have any other source of income beyond migrant smuggling at the time of the survey, and many of those who did, reported smuggling to nonetheless be their main income source.** Smugglers least commonly had an alternative source of income in North Africa, where 55% of those surveyed had no other work – hence the centrality of smuggling as a livelihood.

Among smugglers willing to report how much money they made the month prior to the interview, the average income was 2,004 USD. **When compared to national averages, it is clear that smuggling offers the potential for a much higher income.**

### Smuggler data in focus

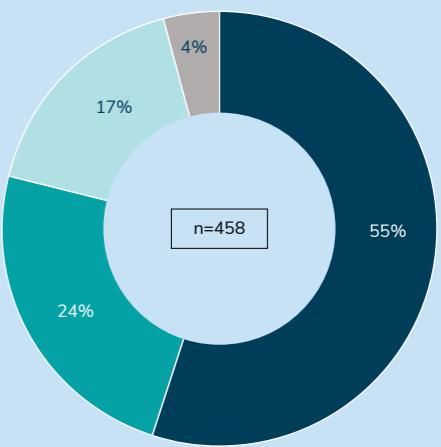
Is migrant smuggling an important source of income for the local community where you work?



n=458

Legend:  
 It is the main source of income  
 It makes up an important source of income  
 It contributes a little  
 Not at all  
 Don't know

Has the importance of smuggling as a source of income for the local community increased, decreased or stayed the same compared to a year ago?



Legend:  
 Increased  
 Stayed the same  
 Decreased  
 Don't know

#### Photo credit:

© Olivia Headon/IOM

A group of migrants from the Horn of Africa arrive in Obock, Djibouti, guided by a local facilitator.



## 2. Operations and structures

### 2.1 Prevalence

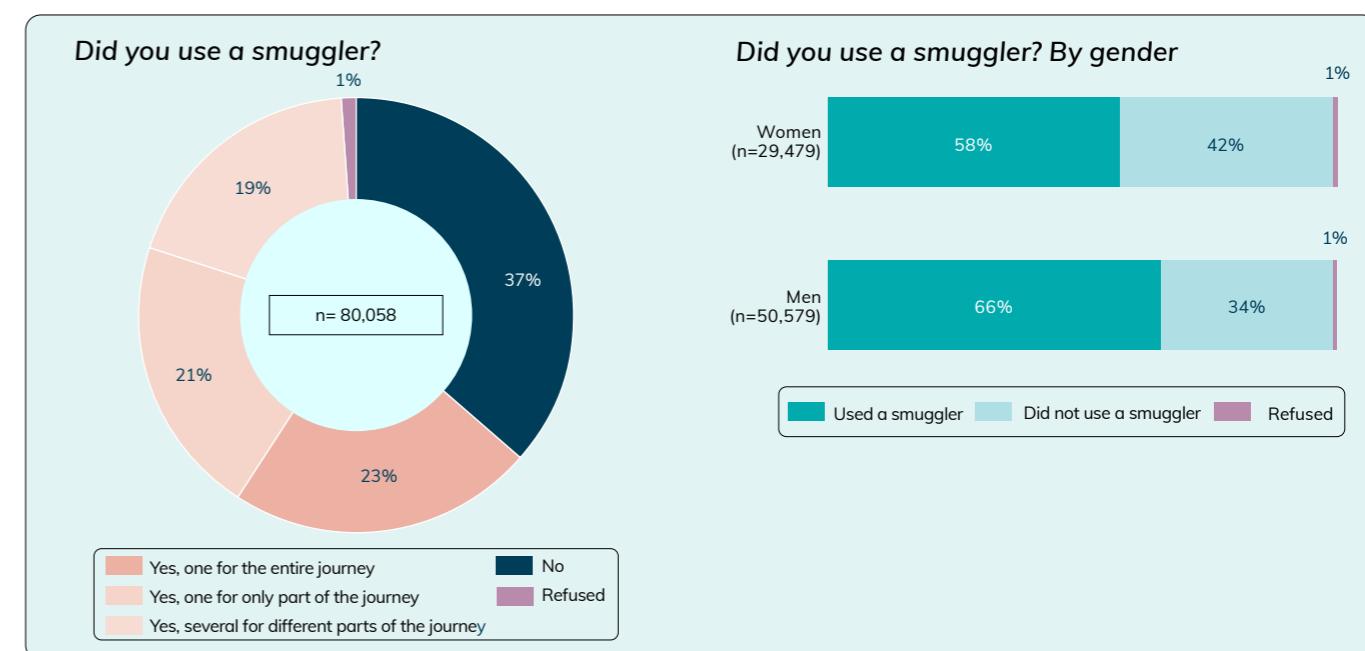
What is the prevalence of smuggling across different routes?

Among over 80,000 refugees and migrants surveyed by MMC since 2019 worldwide, 63% used a smuggler for at least part of their journey, with men resorting to smugglers at slightly higher rates than women.

Smuggler use is ubiquitous among migrants surveyed in Yemen, Greece, and Indonesia, which have in common the maritime journeys most often required for people seeking access to their territories, **making smugglers all but inevitable**. Conversely, smuggler use is lowest among migrants surveyed in Ethiopia (14%) and Guinea (25%).<sup>1</sup> Here, migration is likely to have been characterised by short journeys from neighbouring countries – and in the case of Guinea, visa-free travel under ECOWAS free-movement protocols.

Reflecting these findings, routes-based analysis shows **that respondents more readily use smugglers when travelling long distances, in particular if the journey involves a maritime or desert crossing**: among people travelling from Afghanistan to Indonesia for example, only 1% did so without the support of a smuggler. Conversely, shorter intra-regional journeys can often be undertaken without the need for smuggler support: among refugees and migrants travelling from East Africa towards Ethiopia or Kenya, over three quarters did so without a smuggler.

#### Migrant data in focus



<sup>1</sup> In our analysis, we include only countries in which we have conducted at least 1,000 interviews.

Photo credit:

© Max Böhme on Unsplash

## Determinants of smuggler use – evidence from statistical models

To understand who is most likely to use smugglers, we applied statistical modelling to isolate the effect of individual and journey-related characteristics on the likelihood of smuggler use through logistic regression.

The analysis shows that individuals who are **men, younger, and with no formal education** are more likely to turn to smugglers. So too are **people driven to flee by conflict, violence, or a lack of rights and freedoms**. Making money prior to departure and having sufficient funds to finance the journey also increases use of smugglers, suggesting that **those with resources are better positioned to pay for facilitation** – conversely, those who have to work during their journey, indicating more limited resources, are less likely to be travelling with a smuggler.

Travelling through dangerous locations is a particularly strong determinant, making smuggler use several times more likely: **when faced with perilous journeys, refugees and migrants more readily turn to smugglers**. Similarly, people who obtain information before their journey are more likely to use smugglers, perhaps reflecting awareness of the challenges involved.

### Photo credit:

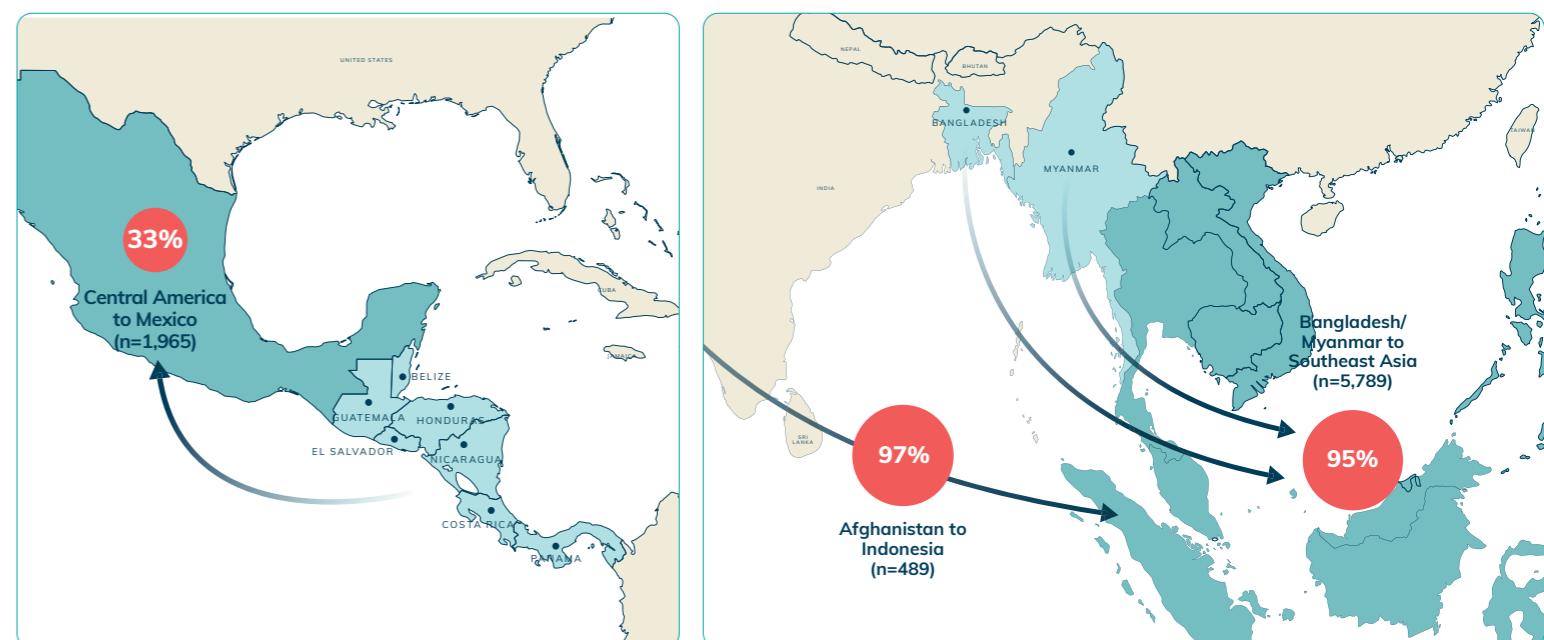
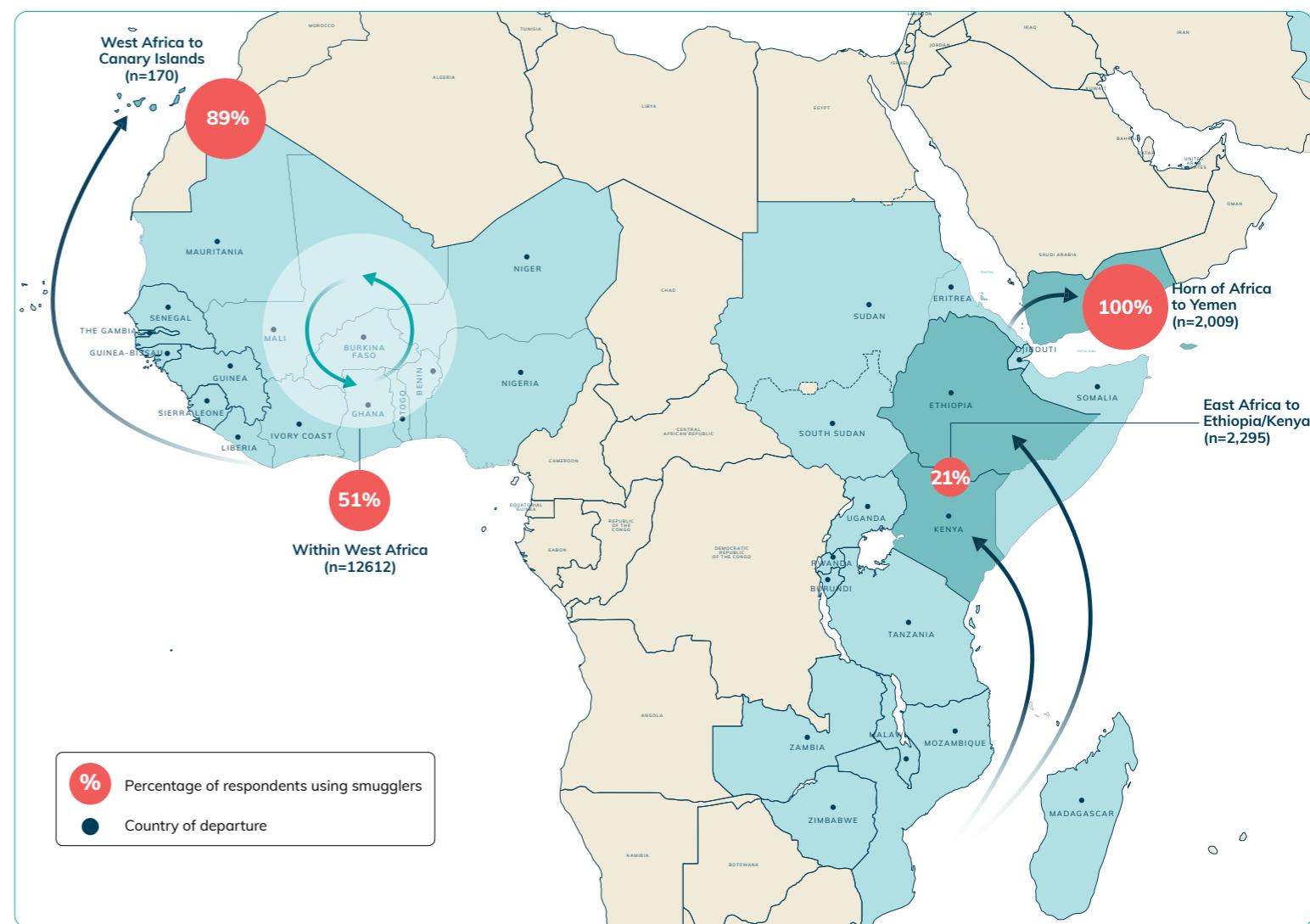
© Tim Lüddemann, 2018

Rescue efforts in the Mediterranean Sea by Sea-Watch, approximately 60 nautical miles from the Libyan Coast.



## Migrant data in focus

### Smuggler use along selected routes



## What is the role of policy in driving shifts in demand and routes?

Among smugglers surveyed in **West and North Africa**, **61% felt that demand for smuggling had increased in the year preceding the survey**. Of these, 85% attributed increased demand for smuggling to an increasing number of people on the move - **but 35% associated this increase in demand to stricter border measures**.

**“ There are always migrants who want to cross, so there is no shortage of money.”**  
**Smuggler**

**“ Migrants come to us. Often at the border, we see them being turned back, and they come to us. They had already left their country and they are stuck. We help them if we can; nothing more than that. Currently, some borders are closed, and we’re the ones who can help them.”**  
**Smuggler**

**“ I got involved in migrant smuggling to help migrants with the border closures. Since I was a driver, I knew the routes I could take to avoid getting caught.”**  
**Smuggler**

**Rather than undermining smuggling networks, stricter border restrictions thus appear to drive greater demand for smuggling, simply redirecting movements along new and often more precarious routes:** nearly half of smugglers indicated the routes offered had changed in the six months prior to the interview, predominantly as a result of changes in border security or police behaviour. This reflects both smuggling networks' ability to adapt to more restrictive measures, and the persistence of demand in the face of evolving policies and approaches to border management.

### Thriving under pressure: How smugglers adapt to restrictions along the Central Mediterranean

Recent MMC surveys along the Central Mediterranean route with **102 smugglers (2024–2025)** challenge assumptions about **smuggling dynamics**. Despite fewer arrivals to Italy, **44% of smugglers reported higher demand**, showing that smuggling markets remain robust.

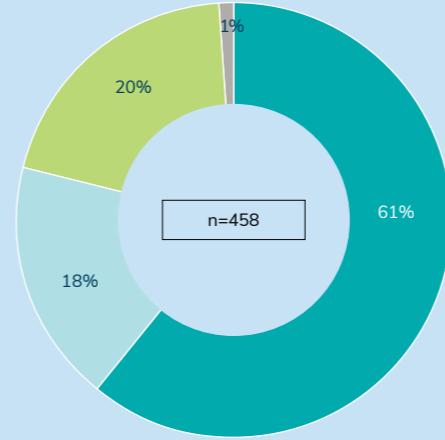
Smugglers are adapting: **49% changed routes and 59% increased fees, primarily in response to tighter border controls**, with many noting that **stricter enforcement actually fuels demand**. As a result, **37% reported higher revenues, underscoring a resilient and flexible market**.

Meanwhile, **nearly half (49%) admitted contact with officials such as border guards, police, or detention staff** — facilitating crossings or obtaining information. Despite tougher policies, **44% had never faced law enforcement**, and most others described only rare encounters.

These findings suggest that **enforcement alone does not deter smuggling**; instead, smugglers adjust, profits rise, and the market endures.

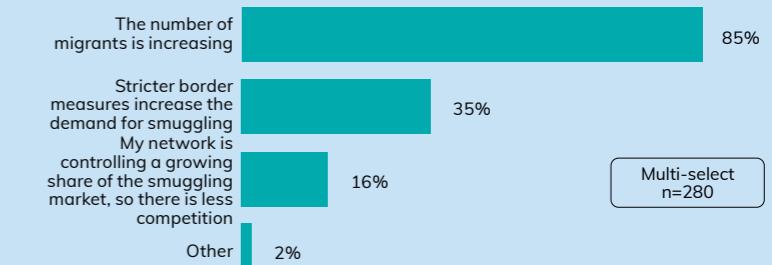
### Smuggler data in focus

**Has demand for migrant smuggling increased, decreased, or stayed the same compared to a year ago?**

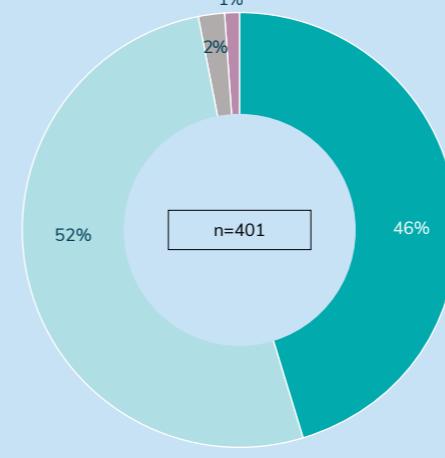


[Legend: Increased (dark teal), Stayed the same (light teal), Decreased (light green), Don't know (brown)]

**Why do you think demand increased?**

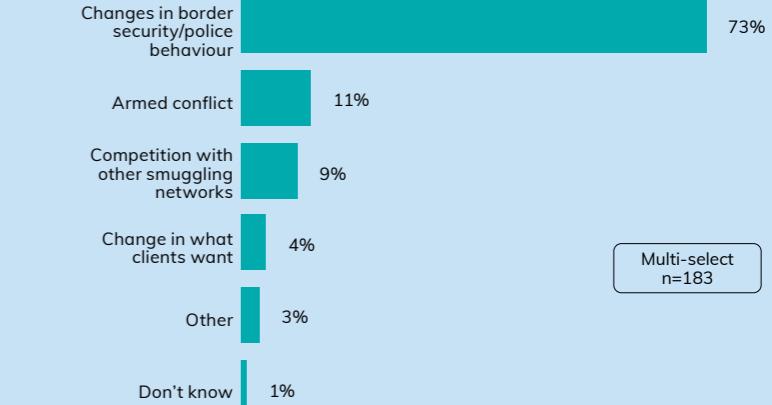


**Have the migration routes you/your group offer changed in the past six months?**



[Legend: Yes (dark teal), No (light teal), Don't know (brown), Refused (pink)]

**What is the primary reason for changing the routes?**



## 2.2 Modus operandi

### What activities are smugglers engaged in?

Transit across borders is the main service provided by smugglers, as reported by over three quarters (77%) of both smugglers and people on the move who rely on them. This is followed by in-country transit, a service reported by 63% of smugglers and 42% of smuggler users.

**Beyond transportation within and across borders, common services offered by smugglers (reported by 25% of refugees and migrants each) include provision of accommodation, food and water, and dealing with officials.** Accommodation is also the third most common type of service reported by smugglers.

**“In San José, we are hiring another smuggler to take us to the border with Nicaragua, so that he can help us make the crossing. He is charging us \$300 for the three of us, and the payment includes the services of a guide, food, and accommodation in his house.”**  
27-year-old Venezuelan man in Costa Rica

**Over a third of smugglers surveyed note that, in the area where they operate, migrant smuggling networks are also involved in other illicit activities.** According to these, drug trafficking is the most widespread activity to be conducted alongside migrant smuggling, followed by money laundering, smuggling of alcohol and tobacco, and sexual exploitation.

**“I personally take my clients as far as Zinder, helping through road checkpoints and putting them in touch with friends for the next leg of the journey. [...] I never knowingly carry drugs or anything like that in my vehicle, unlike some others.”**  
Smuggler

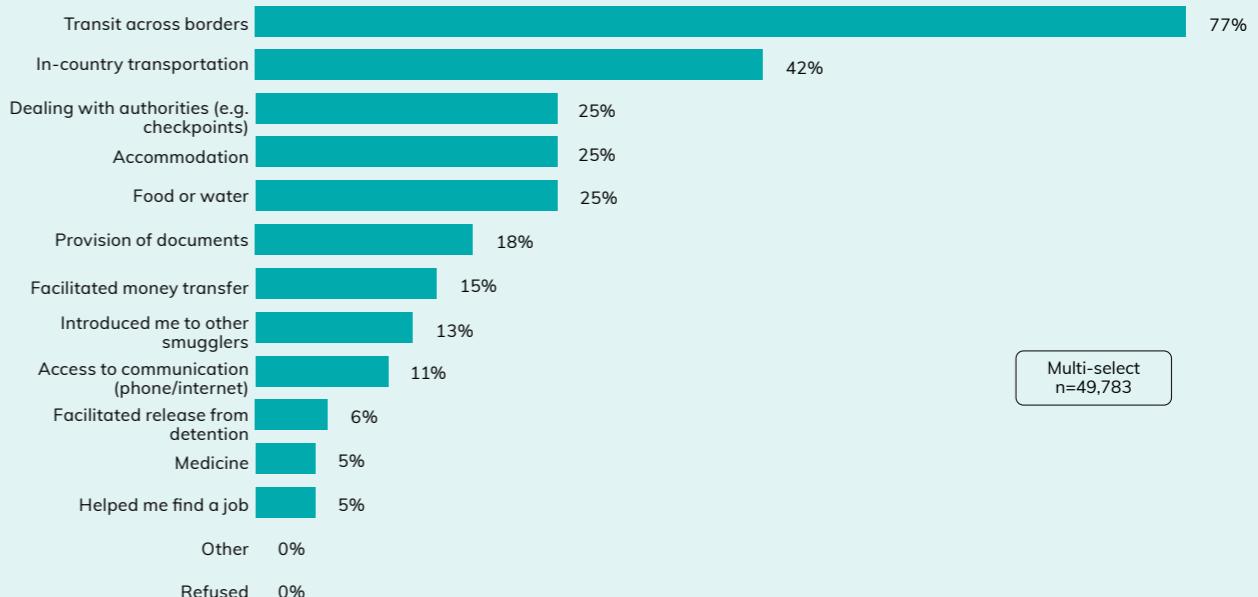


Photo credit:

© Francesco Malavolta/IOM 2015  
Syrian refugees crossing the Serbian-Croatian border.

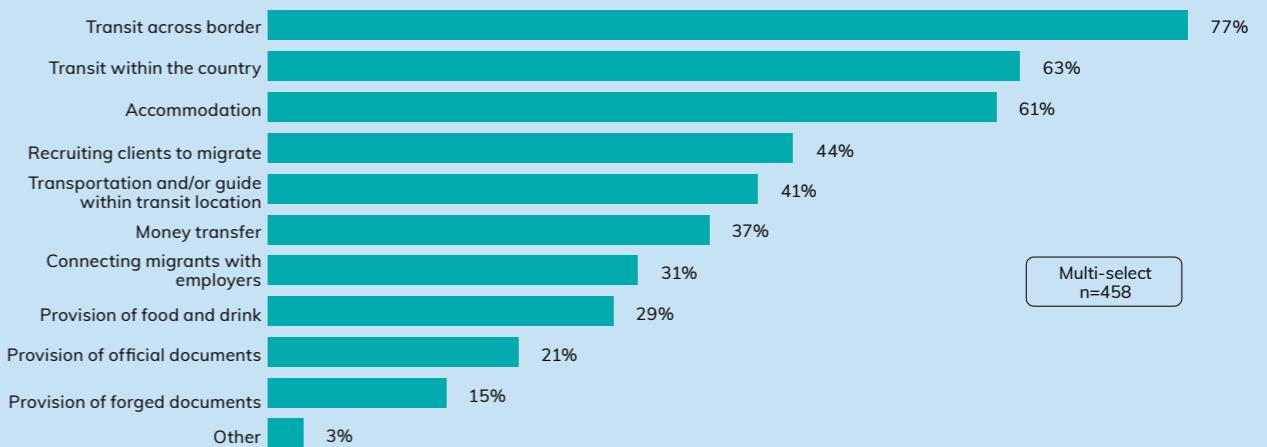
### Migrant data in focus

#### What did the smuggler provide you with?

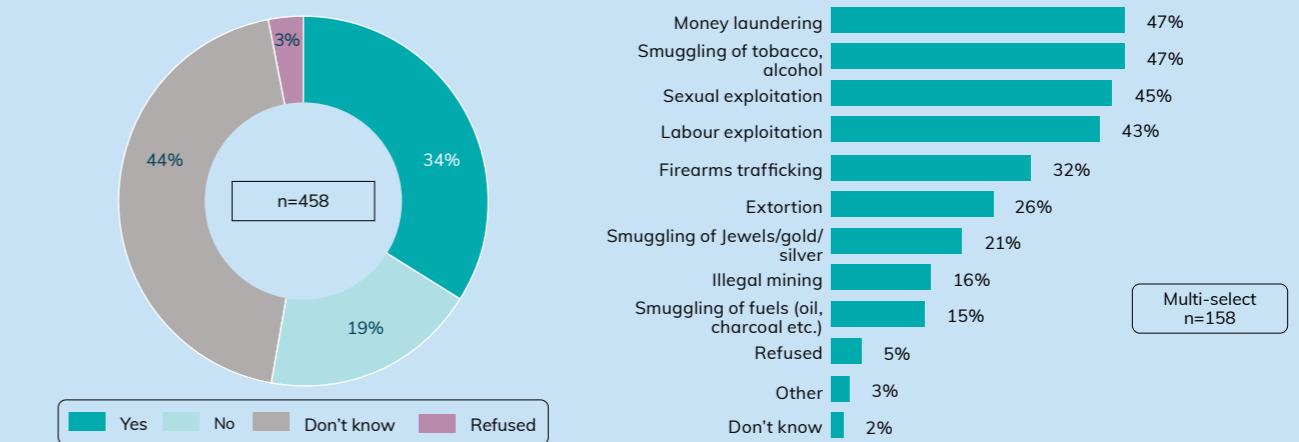


### Smuggler data in focus

#### What kind of services do you/your group provide?



#### In the area where you operate, are there migrant smuggling networks involved in other illicit activities?



## How do refugees and migrants first come into contact with smugglers?

Despite the widespread belief that smugglers play an active role in instigating irregular migration, **data collected among both smugglers and smuggler users indicates that smugglers in fact only rarely initiate contact themselves.**

**38% of migrants and refugees were put in touch by family or friends; many others approached the smuggler directly**, either by phone (30%), in person (23%), or through social media (8%). Women less commonly approached smugglers directly, instead being much more often 'referred' to smugglers by family and friends.

**“When we decided to migrate to the United States, we looked for information about the routes, and a family member who has been in the United States for seven months advised us to join a WhatsApp group for migrants. There, they share information about the routes, the costs, and what you need to bring to cross the jungle [...] You can also check the prices charged by the smugglers who help people cross the jungle, and even phone numbers are shared. In that group, people talk about their experiences, which smugglers are better than others — lots of things, really.”**

**39-year-old Venezuelan man in Costa Rica**

**“We can't talk much about the smuggler's identity because that's forbidden, but if you want to find a smuggler, you just go on Facebook and look — they pop up. But I can't say anything about their identity because they'll kill me or my family who stayed in Colombia.”**

**34-year-old Ecuadorian man in Costa Rica**

**“I got in touch with a smuggler through social media. He gave me the details about the route, the total cost, the possible dangers, and in the end we negotiated a deal.”**

**40-year-old Ecuadorian man in Costa Rica**

**Being approached directly by the smuggler, on the other hand, was much less widespread:** 9% of migrants indicated the smuggler had approached them directly in person, 6% by phone, and just 2% through social media.

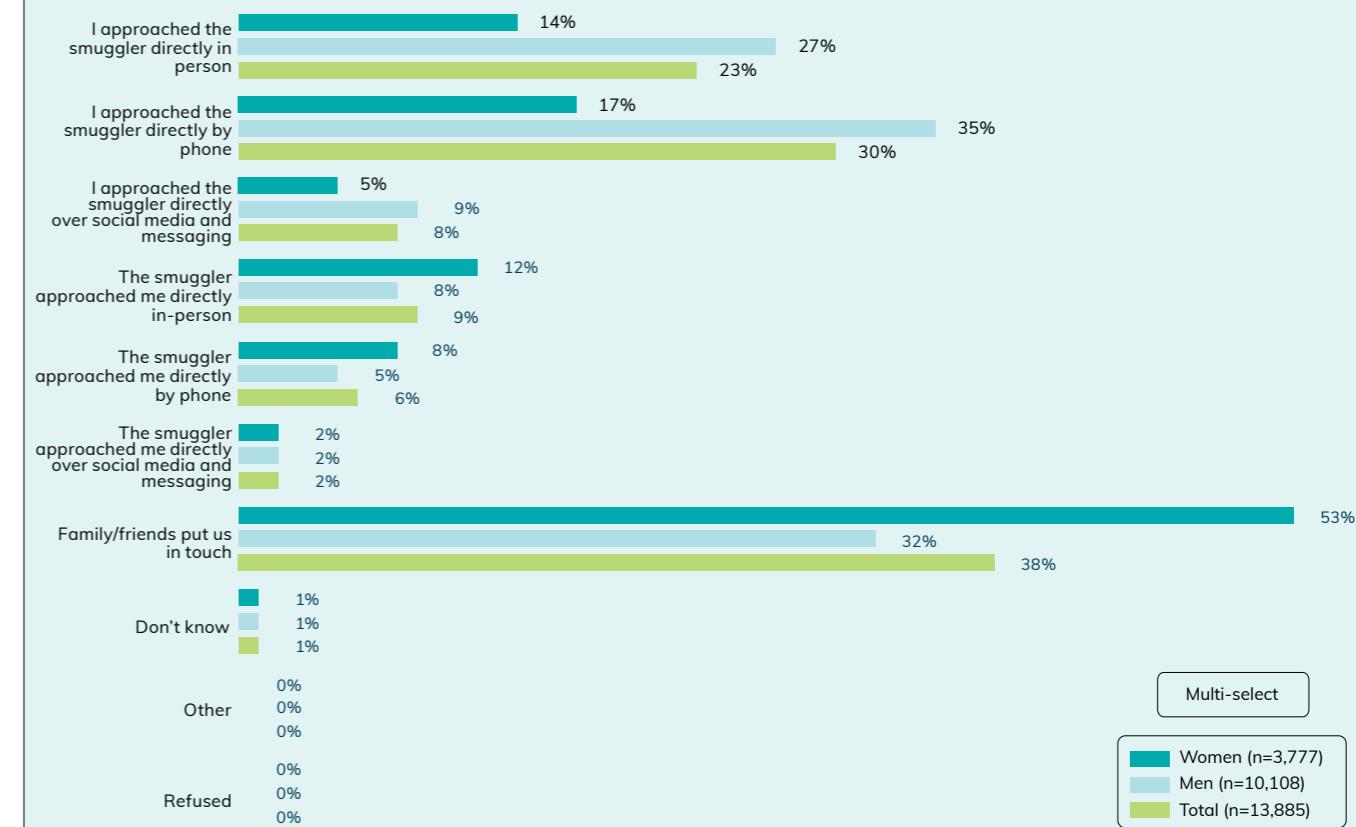
Smugglers' testimonies echoed those of their clients. **The most common strategy reported by smugglers was to get in touch via mutual friends, family or acquaintances (70%), and over two thirds (67%) of smugglers indicated that they were approached by migrants directly.** In other instances, smugglers may get in touch with migrants at bus stations and other transport hubs, or through social media.

### Targeted recruitment by smugglers: the case of Bangladeshi migrants

Certain nationalities appear to be more 'actively' targeted by smugglers for recruitment. Among Bangladeshi smuggler users surveyed (n=303), over a third reported being directly approached by smugglers in person (39%), through social media (38%) or over the phone (34%).

### Migrant data in focus

#### Smuggling module: How did you first get in touch with the initial smuggler?

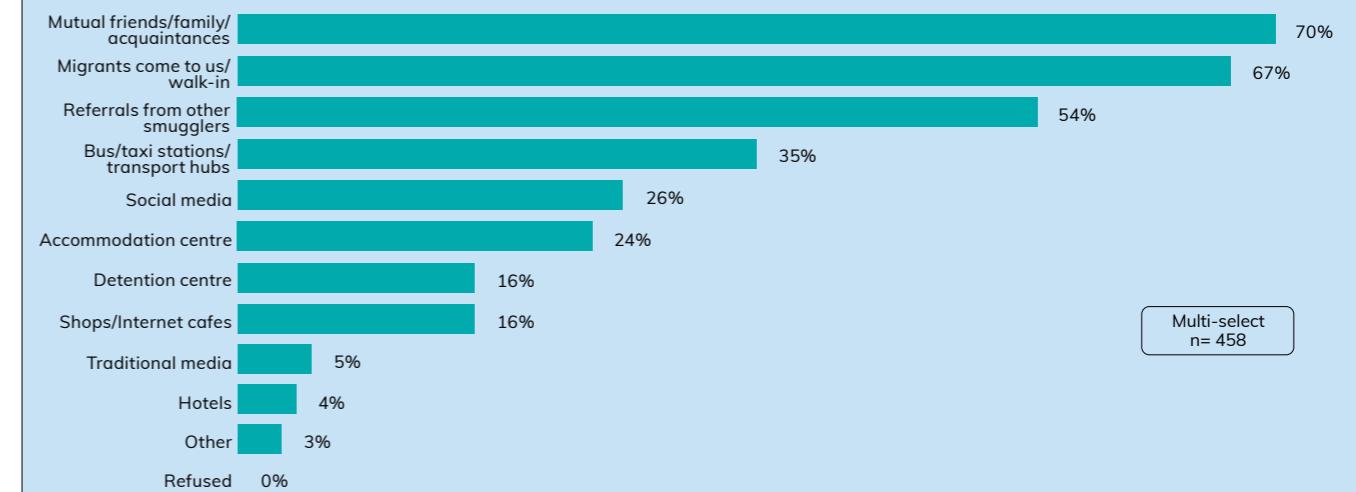


Multi-select

Women (n=3,777)  
Men (n=10,108)  
Total (n=13,885)

### Smuggler data in focus

#### How do you or how does your group first get in touch with migrants?



Multi-select  
n= 458

## 2.3 Costs and payment terms

### What are the typical costs involved in using smugglers and how do these vary?

Respondents participating in the smuggling module had spent a median cost of 400 USD at the time of data collection.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, certain routes were much more expensive than others: for example, the median cost for migrants travelling from Afghanistan to Indonesia was 5,000 USD, whereas for those travelling within West Africa it was just 60 USD. Distance does not appear to be the only factor, however: people on the move from Syria to Türkiye reported some of the highest fees, with a median cost of 4,500 USD.

Smugglers,<sup>3</sup> meanwhile, reported a much higher average cost for their services in North Africa than in West Africa, with average reported costs for smugglers' services at 964 USD and 367 USD respectively.

Among smugglers who provided an average cost, **41% noted this price evolved according to the type of service, and 40% highlighted that the price could be impacted by the security situation along the route. The frequency of government controls (29%) can also impact costs**, alongside other factors such as the client's nationality, the season, or the client's age or gender.

**“In Venezuela, I lived close to the border. I contacted some advisers —that's what they call themselves, but they're smugglers. They charged me 300 dollars to get me into Peru. The journey was smooth because they took care of everything. My baby is 2 years old and they didn't charge for him. I carried him on my lap.”**

**21-year-old Venezuelan woman in Peru**

**“In my network, minors who travel by land pay more because they slow us down, which increases our risk of being pursued. I prefer that no one gets caught, because once someone is arrested, I have to pay to find out where they are detained before getting them out.”**

**Smuggler**

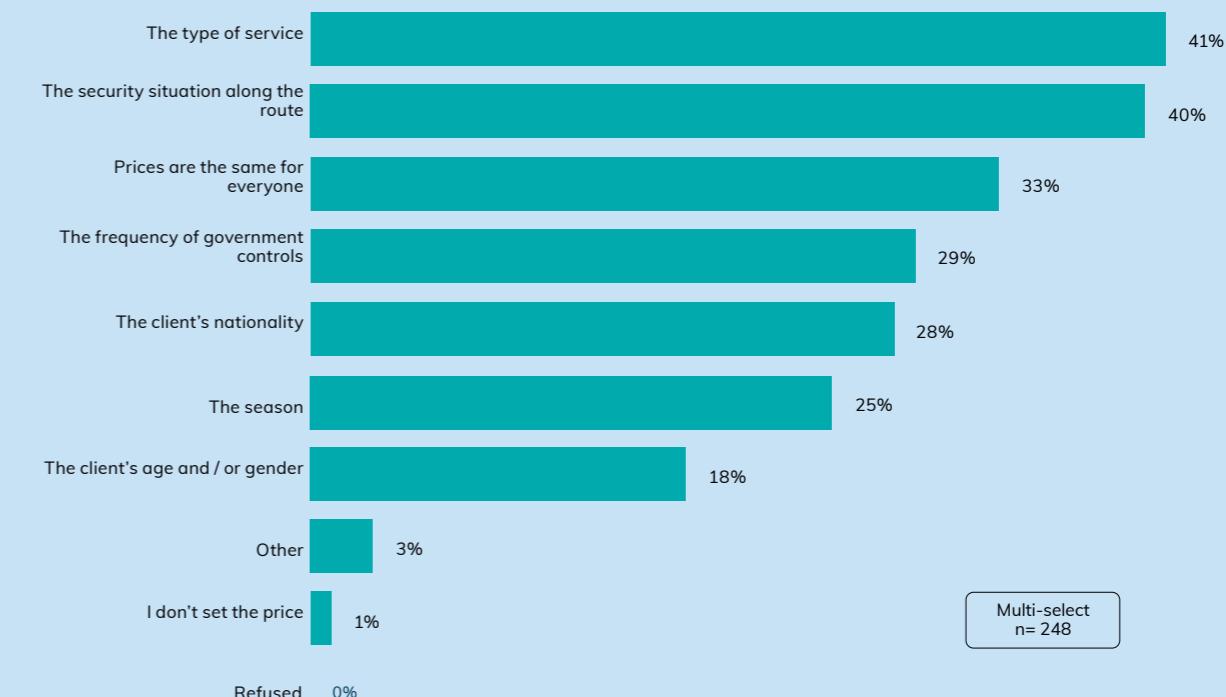
**“At this particular time, demand is increasing by the day because Ramadan is approaching and the authorities are more lenient during this period. Everyone who is in the city or still en route is in a rush to arrive quickly because they don't want to miss this window, which is why prices are going up along the route.”**

**Smuggler**

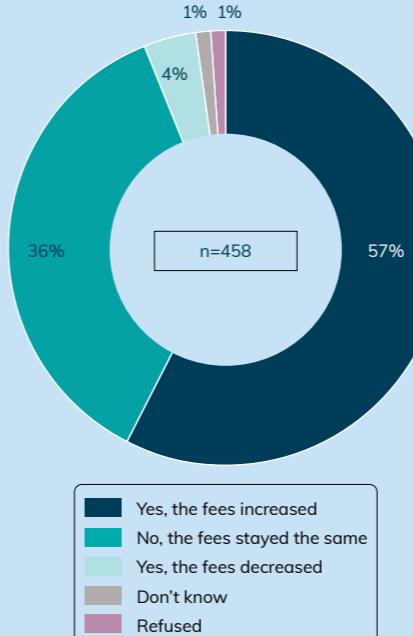
Over half (57%) of all smugglers surveyed said they or their group had increased their fees in the past year. Among those reporting an increase in fees, **more than three quarters associated rising costs to riskier activities due to an increase in government controls** – a factor widely reported in all five countries where data was collected. This strongly confirms the notion that **stricter controls and anti-smuggling measures drive up the prices and increase profits for smugglers**. More than half also noted the rising fees were linked to the higher costs incurred in providing the service. Once again, this points to **smuggling networks adapting their routes in response to stricter measures, increasing the costs and potential risks of movement rather than reducing either demand for or supply of smuggling services**.

### Smuggler data in focus

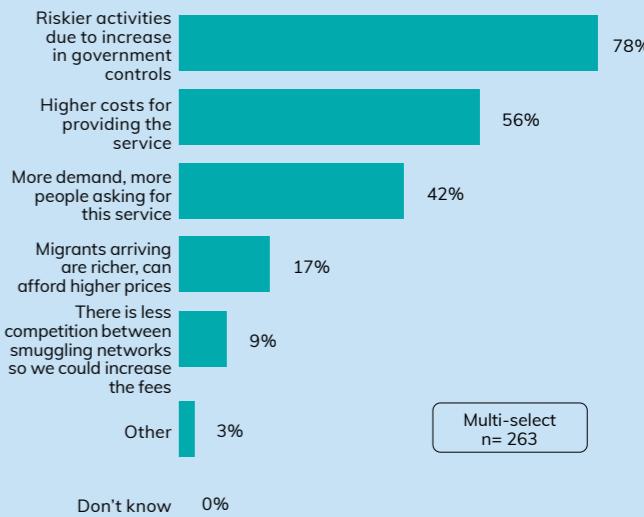
#### What affects the prices you charge?



#### Have you/your group changed your fees in the past six months?



#### Why have you/your group increased the fees in the past six months?

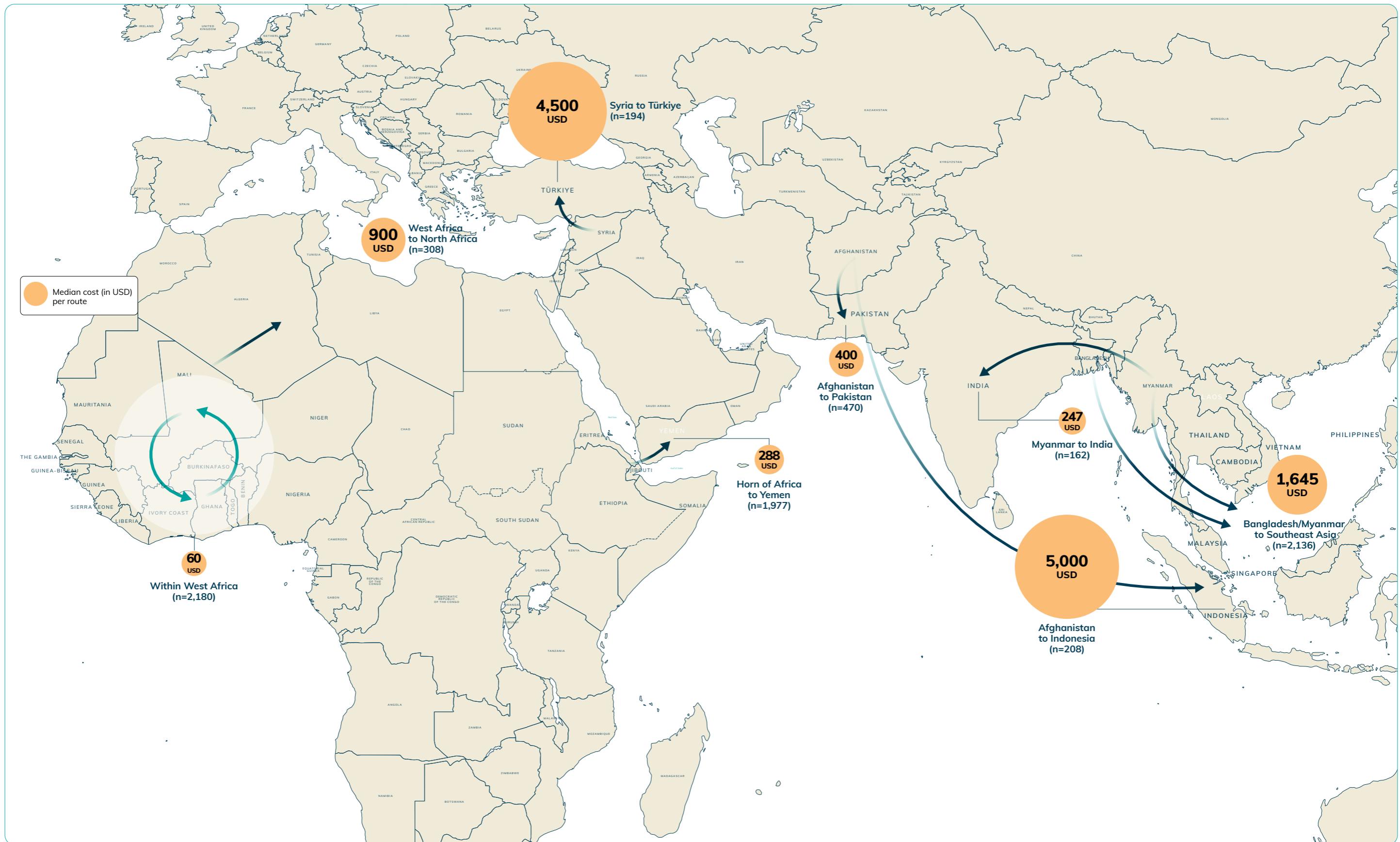


<sup>2</sup> The mean cost across all respondents was 1,271 USD. Given the large sample and the presence of outliers, we chose to report the median rather than the mean for costs reported by migrants.

<sup>3</sup> This is based on estimates provided by 248 smugglers who charge migrants directly and were able to provide an average cost for their services.

## Migrant data in focus

**Smuggling module:** How much have you paid so far for smugglers' services? Overall median cost for 10,013 respondents: 400 (median cost in USD).



## What are the most prevalent payment methods, terms, and enforcement practices?

Refugees and migrants travelling with smugglers more commonly borrowed ahead of departure to finance their journey, at 23% compared to 13% of non-smuggler users – they also more commonly had their journey financed by family (44% vs 31%), suggesting a risk of debt for family members as well as migrants themselves. **Family members sometimes continue to shoulder the cost throughout the journey**; among migrants who departed on their journey with insufficient funds,<sup>4</sup> 36% of smuggler users got family or friends to send them more money en route, eleven percentage points more than non-smuggler users.

### Payment practices varied according to route

Among refugees and migrants travelling from the Horn of Africa to Yemen (n=1,999), 84% reported having paid in full before departure. This was also the case for 78% of migrants travelling from South America to Central America (n=1,097). Conversely, among migrants travelling from Afghanistan to Pakistan (n=852), 92% paid only upon arrival at destination or upon service delivery.

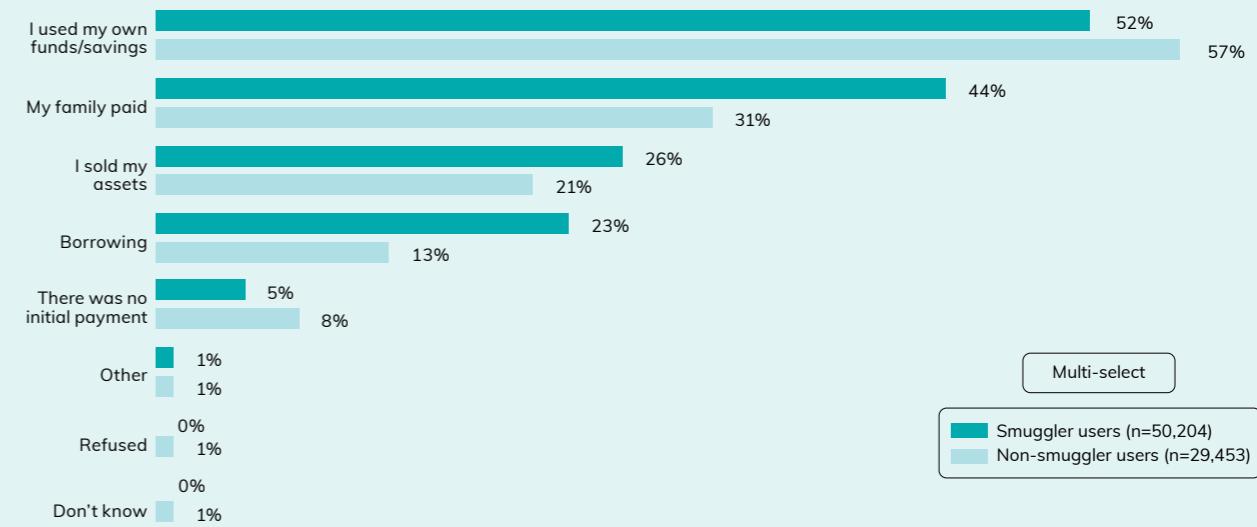
Among migrants who used smugglers for at least part of their journey, **just 37% reported having paid their smuggler in full before departure, with a further 37% paying their smuggler in full only upon arrival at destination or upon service delivery**. Paying the smuggler in instalments along the way was also common practice, reported by 20% of respondents. **Suggesting a risk of bonded labour, 3% of all migrants report paying their smugglers through labour**, a percentage which increases to 17% for migrants travelling within Southeast Asian countries, 14% from the Horn of Africa to Sudan, and 11% from West Africa to North Africa.

Meanwhile, **86% of smugglers said that migrants typically pay at least part of their fees at departure**, while 32% pay along the way and 36% upon arrival at the final agreed destination. Close to half (46%) of smugglers requested the totality of payment upfront, while just 6% collected the full payment only upon arrival – a risky strategy, in the eyes of smugglers surveyed.

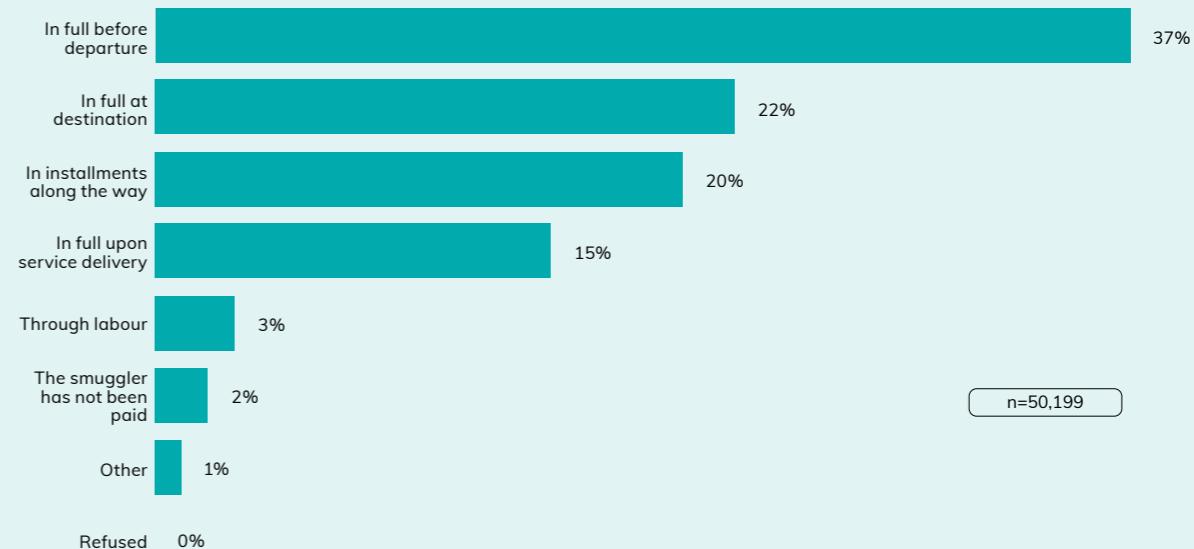
**“ Some people come and try to run off without paying, so now it’s mandatory to pay before leaving the country of departure.”**  
**Smuggler**

### Migrant data in focus

#### How did you initially finance your journey? By smuggler use

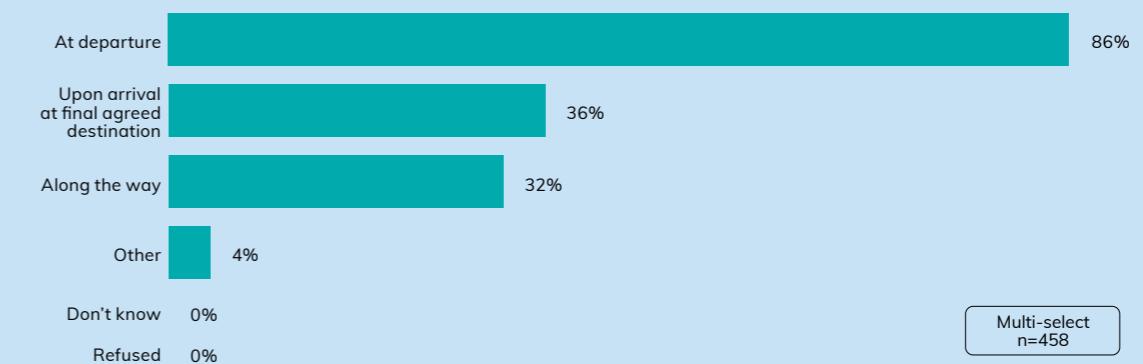


#### How did you pay the smuggler?



### Smuggler data in focus

#### When do migrants typically pay the fees?



<sup>4</sup> 17,930 smuggler users and 26,833 non-smuggler users did not leave with sufficient funds.

Among smugglers who do not require full payment before departure, 71% require at least some prepayment. To guarantee payment, 64% also report sometimes detaining clients until they pay the full amount -a particularly common practice in North Africa, where it is reported by 75% of smugglers.

“ Migrants these days think they can be clever, so with me, as soon as I take you on, you pay immediately. And if you try to be clever, we kidnap you and you'll pay double — after we burn you with melted plastic.”

Smuggler

“ I bring them here at my own expense. Once they arrive, they pay me half, and then they work for six months to reimburse me. There are young people who don't respect the work commitments — in those cases, we are forced to confiscate their passports until they finish paying the travel expenses.”

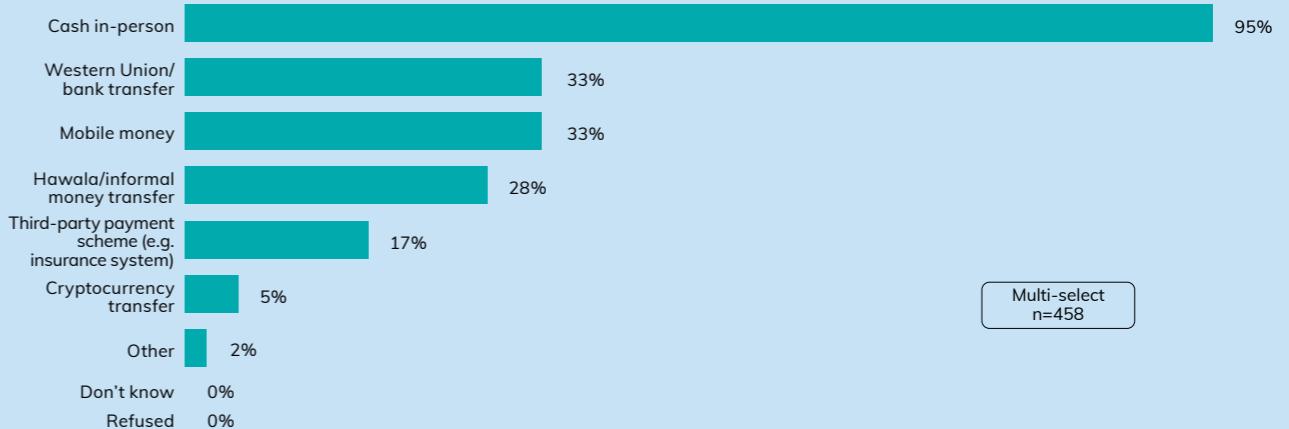
Female smuggler

**Photo credit:**  
© Muse Mohammed/IOM  
Tecún Umán, Guatemala, located on the border with Mexico.

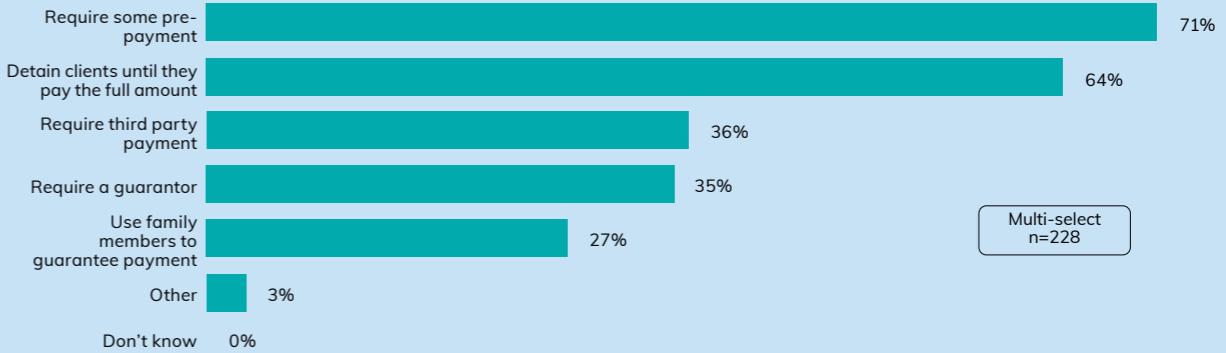


## Smuggler data in focus

### How can migrants pay the fees?



### How do you guarantee payment?



## 2.4 Corruption and collusion

### What roles do state officials play in enabling or combatting smuggling?

Despite avowed efforts to combat migrant smuggling, **State officials play a key role in facilitating the irregular movement of people.**

**Nearly a third of respondents said state officials were involved in or facilitated migrant smuggling during their journey.**

Corroborating these findings – and suggesting that migrants may not always be aware of such collusion – **57% of smugglers surveyed acknowledged having contact with State officials to facilitate migrant smuggling**, predominantly by releasing migrants from detention, guiding migrants across the border, and providing information on patrols' locations.

**The most common state officials involved, according to smugglers, were police and border control followed by detention centre staff**, reflecting qualitative testimonies about smugglers' ability to secure release from detention.

**State officials almost always receive payment for their 'cooperation':** only two of the smugglers said they did not pay the officials with whom they were in contact to facilitate their operations. While most of these payments are issued by the smugglers, in a third of cases migrants themselves pay the cost.

Likely as a result of such agreements, smuggler users come into contact with State officials less often than non-smuggler users during their journeys – but when such encounters do occur, they report higher rates of bribery and extortion than non-smuggler users, suggesting that **mutually beneficial arrangements between corrupt officials and smugglers are sometimes to the detriment of refugees and migrants themselves**. During encounters with State officials, people travelling with smugglers more commonly paid bribes to all types of officials listed, but particularly to police at a border, police in other locations, and the military. This heightened exposure to bribery and extortion is also reflected in personal experiences of risk detailed later in the report.

**“ I can't blame the authorities for being involved in this kind of work, because it's what earns them a lot of money. ”**  
**Smuggler**

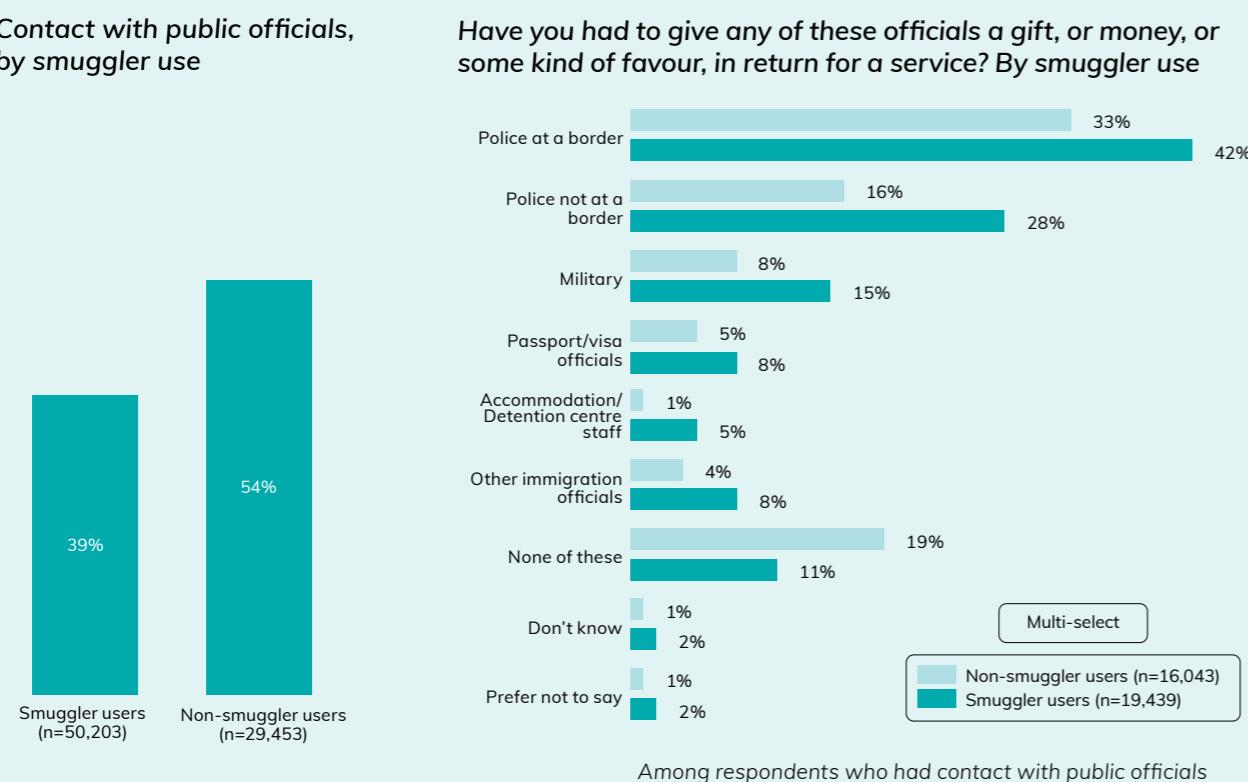
**“ The authorities are corruptible because they're poorly paid. ”**  
**Smuggler**



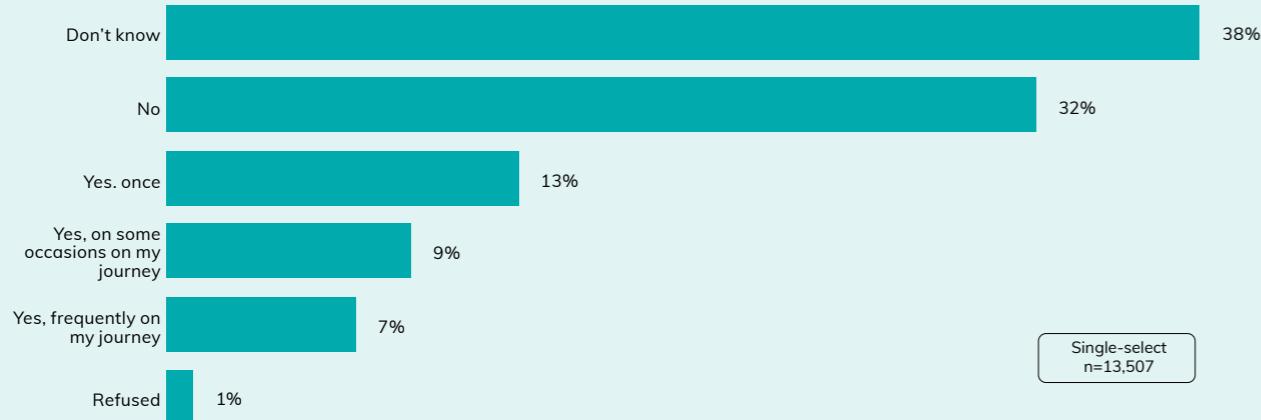
**Photo credit:**  
© United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), 2016  
Mattresses in Abu Salim migrants detention centre warehouse in Tripoli, Libya.

## Migrant data in focus

### Contact with public officials, by smuggler use



### Smuggling module: Were state officials involved in or did they facilitate migrant smuggling during your journey?

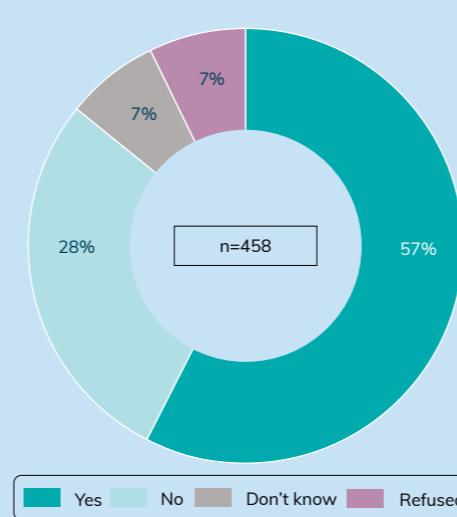


**“ We entered Colombia legally and wanted to see if we could enter Panama legally too, but all migration in Turbo is controlled by the smugglers... At every border, there are smugglers waiting for you, and the police are in collusion with them. ”**

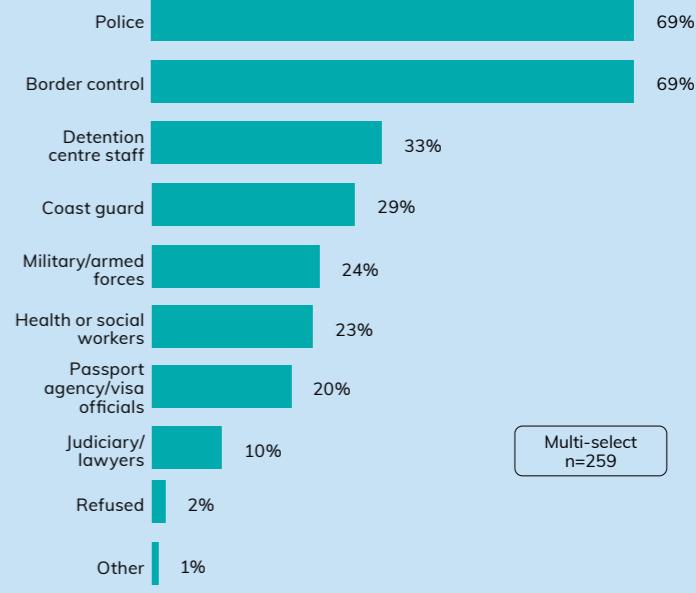
**23-year-old Venezuelan man in Costa Rica**

## Smuggler data in focus

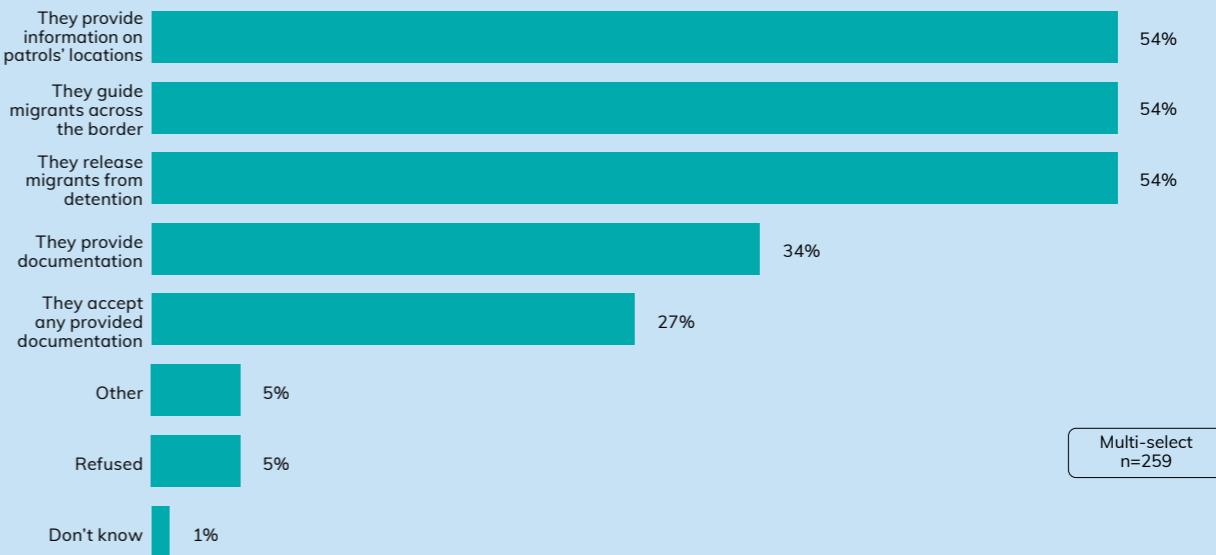
### Do you or your group have any contact with state officials to facilitate migrant smuggling?



### Which type of state officials are you/your group in contact with?



### How are public/state officials involved in migrant smuggling?



### 3. Impacts and outcomes

#### 3.1 Impact of anti-smuggling policies for smugglers

To what extent do smugglers experience enforcement actions, and with what consequences?

Smugglers experience enforcement actions to varying degrees. While over a quarter of smugglers surveyed feel that authorities do not really implement any measures to counter smuggling – or even, at times, encourage it – **two thirds report that counter-smuggling measures are either moderately (35%) or strictly (31%) implemented**. Strict implementation appears most common in North Africa, as reported by 41% of smugglers.

Despite counter-smuggling efforts, over half of smugglers surveyed had never been questioned, apprehended or arrested by law enforcement officials for migrant smuggling. Although more than a third have been either questioned or apprehended, only 16% have actually been arrested as a result of their activities. Impunity appears particularly high among smugglers surveyed in West Africa, where 54% of respondents had never faced any challenges with law enforcement.

Arrest is often only temporary: two thirds of the smugglers who had experienced arrest were released from detention after paying a bribe, and over a third were able to pay a bribe or fine to avoid detention altogether. The risk is nonetheless real: 13 smugglers reported being physically abused, four tortured, and one sexually abused during their arrest.

**“ The authorities do arrest you, that’s true — but they strip you of everything (money, phone, good shoes), and then they let you go. ”**  
Smuggler

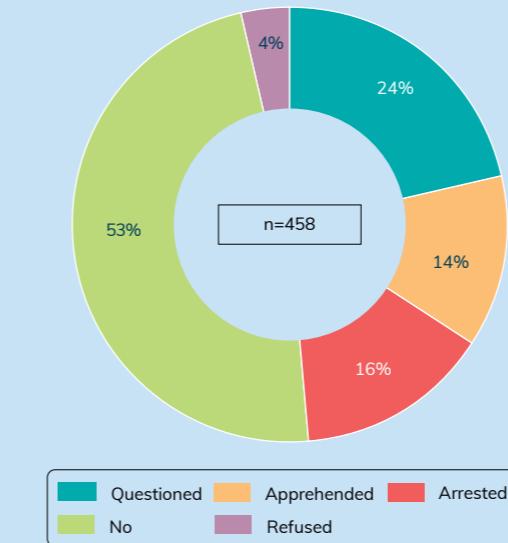
**“ It’s easy with the state officials, but we’re afraid of bandits, who are numerous along the border, especially in areas that are particularly porous for us. ”**  
Smuggler

#### Smuggler data in focus

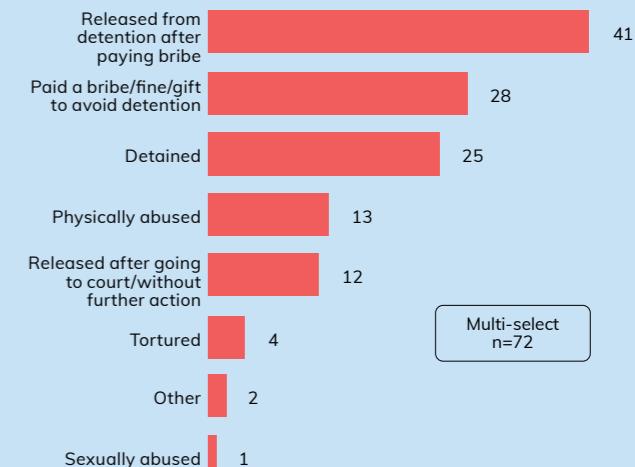
Which statement most accurately reflects how authorities address migrant smuggling where you operate?



Have you ever been questioned, apprehended or arrested by law enforcement officials for migrant smuggling?



What happened after your arrest?



## 3.2 Risks for refugees and migrants

### To what extent are refugees and migrants travelling with smugglers exposed to greater risks?

Refugees and migrants are more likely to hire smugglers when faced with a dangerous journey; **because they are generally travelling along more dangerous routes, smuggler users face greater risks.**

Around three quarters of smuggler users report passing through at least one dangerous location during their journey, compared to half of non-smuggler users; statistical modelling shows that smuggler use is over three times more likely for those travelling through dangerous locations. Smuggler users are therefore exposed to greater risks because of the nature of the routes along which they are travelling.

Often, **refugees and migrants hire smugglers specifically to mitigate these risks:** 19% of respondents mention hiring smugglers as a way to protect themselves, though other measures such as travelling in a group were more widespread. The role of smugglers as a source of protection are particularly apparent in some testimonies from Central America about crossing the Darien Gap.

**“I paid a smuggler to protect my family. The smuggler I hired turned out to be good. I have no complaints — we weren’t robbed or my wife assaulted. If you’re going to migrate, it’s better to pay a smuggler to help you through the whole process.”**

**33-year-old Venezuelan man in Costa Rica**

**“Before starting my journey from Colombia, I hired a Colombian smuggler who helped me cross the jungle. I’m thankful to him because I wasn’t robbed. I only suffered minor injuries and non-physical distress. The smuggler played a big role in making sure I wasn’t robbed or harmed.”**

**34-year-old Ecuadorian man in Costa Rica**

**“I’m very grateful to them [the smuggler] because we came out unharmed. The smuggler supported us, encouraged us, and even put sulphur on our boots to ward off snakes. During storms, he led us to safe places. He really looked after us.”**

**39-year-old Venezuelan man in Costa Rica**

However, **the greater risks faced by smuggler users cannot be explained by the route alone:** among refugees and migrants travelling along dangerous routes, 88% of smuggler users personally experienced protection incidents, compared to 83% of non-smuggler users.

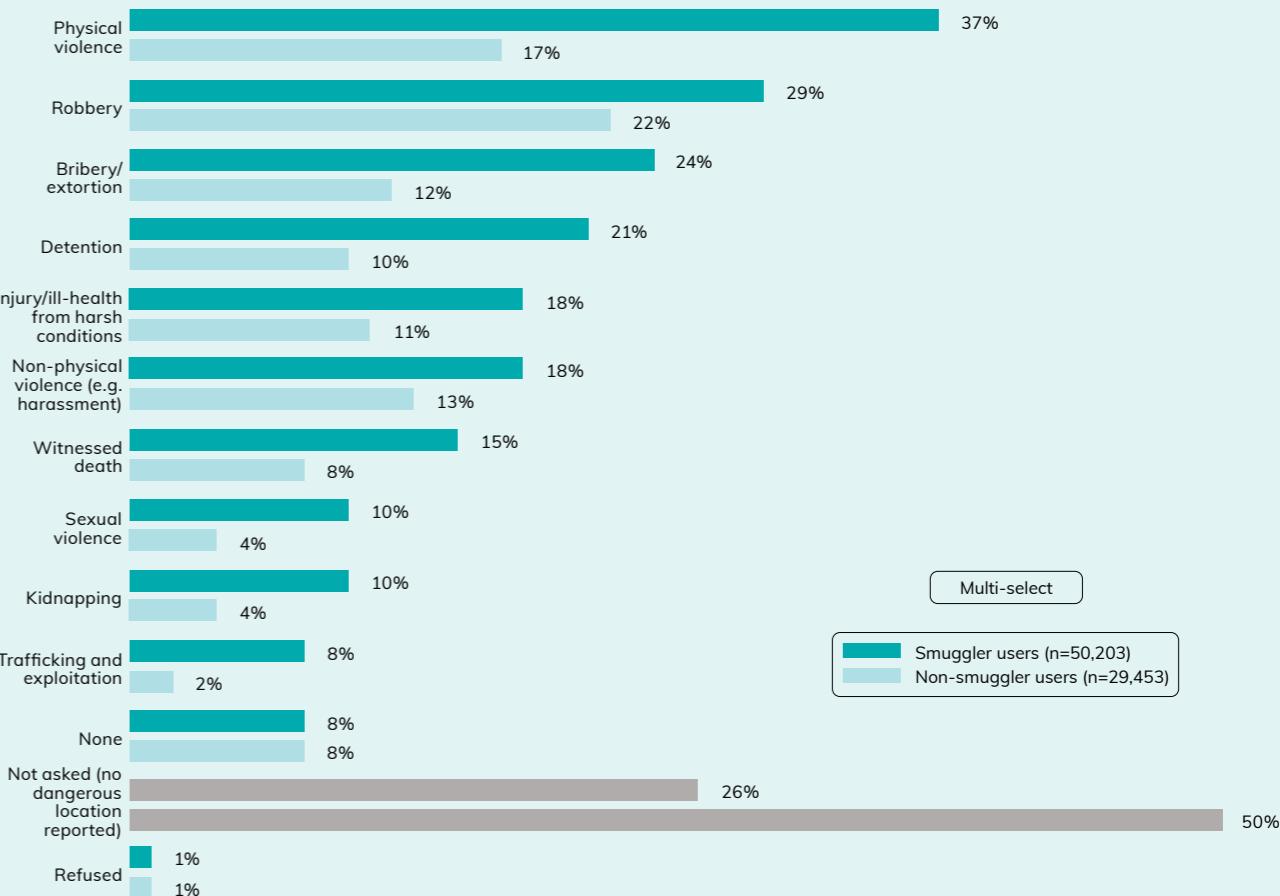
Beyond the perils of the journey generally facilitated by smugglers, **hiring a smuggler is also risky itself, as 21% of refugees and migrants identify smugglers as perpetrators of abuse.**<sup>5</sup> Nationals of certain countries affected by conflict and violence, such as Myanmar, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan, appear more prone to perceiving smugglers as a source of risk, suggesting smugglers may be taking advantage of vulnerability.

#### Variation in reported smuggler-related risks across routes

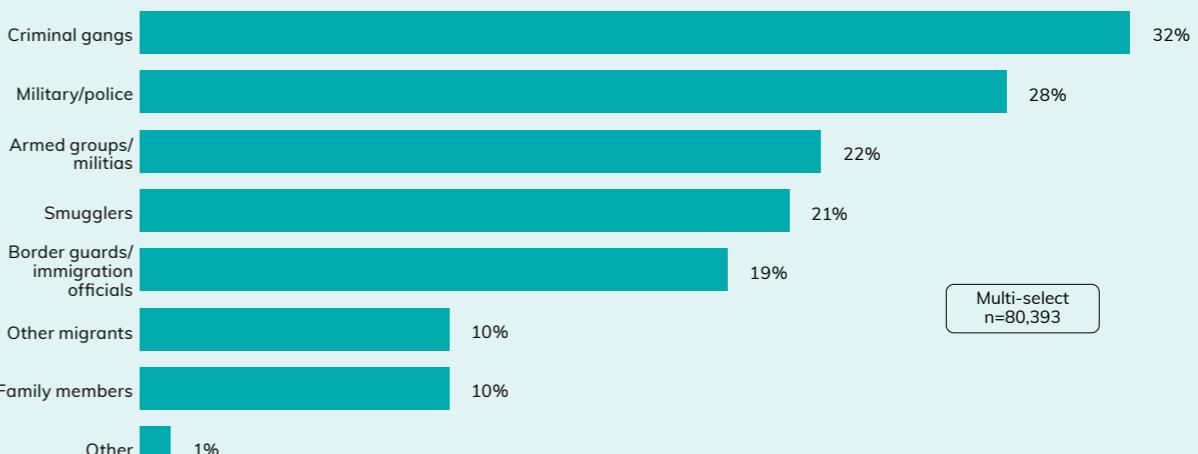
People on the move along specific routes report smugglers as perpetrators at higher rates. In particular, among migrants who travelled to Yemen from the Horn of Africa (n=2,009), 81% report smugglers as perpetrators of perceived risks. Respondents interviewed in Greece (n=2,184) and Malaysia (n=4,664) also often reported smugglers as perpetrators, at 53% and 52% respectively. Conversely, reflecting the need for nuance in the depiction of smugglers as perpetrators, this is the case for just 1% of respondents travelling from East Africa to Ethiopia or Kenya (n=2,295), and 2% of those travelling within West Africa (n=12,620).

#### Migrant data in focus

Have you personally experienced any of these types of incidents on your journey? By smuggler use



Who were perpetrating risks reported in dangerous locations?



<sup>5</sup> Respondents were first asked whether they had passed through any dangerous locations. Respondents were able to name up to 5. For each dangerous location cited, they were asked about perceived risks in that location and the perceived perpetrators. Those who did not identify dangerous locations (28,337 respondents, equivalent to 35% of the sample), were not asked about risks or perpetrators. The percentages presented in this section are nonetheless calculated based on the full sample.

Smuggler users therefore find themselves doubly exposed: because of the dangers of the route and risks associated to the use of smugglers. As a result of this double exposure, **smuggler users more commonly report personally experiencing risks and abuse**. The widest reported gap is for physical violence, experienced by 37% of all smuggler users compared to 17% of non-smuggler users; statistical models show that **those who use smugglers are almost twice as likely to experience any forms of harm** (see box below).

Reflecting the risks to which refugees and migrants are exposed, a third of smugglers surveyed had witnessed death, a quarter had witnessed sexual violence, and nearly half had witnessed physical violence.

### Smuggler use and protection risks – evidence from statistical models

Going beyond the descriptive statistics presented throughout this report, we applied logistic and linear regressions to examine the link between smuggler use and risks and incidents. By controlling for demographic, socioeconomic, and route-related factors, the models were able to identify the independent effect of smuggler use on the likelihood of experiencing incidents, including physical violence, and the variety of types of incidents experienced.

Across models, smuggler use is strongly associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing incidents of any kind and a greater variety of incidents. **Migrants who rely on smugglers face almost double the odds of experiencing any form of harm compared to non-smuggler users** and are 1.7 times more likely to experience physical violence. Those who use smugglers also experience more types of incidents on average, suggesting that migrants travelling with smugglers are more often exposed to unsafe conditions or abusive practices.

**Smuggler users also face a greater risk of trafficking.** Personal experiences of trafficking and exploitation were reported by 8% of respondents who used a smuggler, compared to 2% of those who didn't. Among those paying their smugglers through labour (n=1,527), 19% experienced trafficking and exploitation, indicating widespread debt bondage. The line between smuggling and trafficking is often blurred: many refugees and migrants find themselves detained by their smugglers or criminal associates for the purposes of extortion, sexual exploitation, or forced labour.

#### Photo credit:

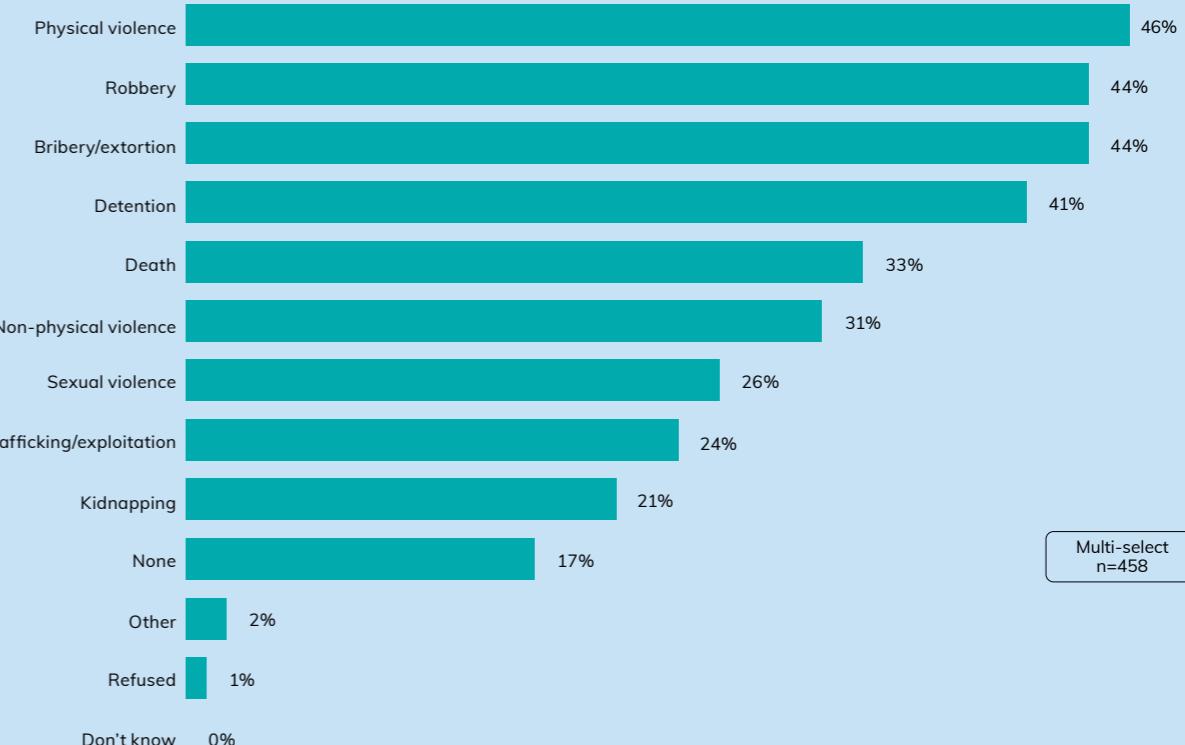
© Emiliano Capozoli/IOM

At the Choucha refugee camp near the Ras Djir,

Tunisia-Libya border crossing.

### Smuggler data in focus

#### What kind of incidents have you witnessed during your work in smuggling?



### 3.3 Migration outcomes

#### How do migrants perceive smugglers in retrospect?

Reflecting the ambiguous nature of smugglers as sources of both risk and protection, a quarter (23%) of respondents describe their smugglers as criminals, but 14% portray them as a protection resource. Most commonly, **smugglers are described as service providers/business persons (48%)** – necessary in the absence of alternatives.

**“Before my journey, I'd heard a lot of rumours about smugglers — that they're traffickers and criminals who only take migrants' money and then disappear. But I personally haven't experienced that. Since I started my journey up to now, I've been with the same smugglers, and the service has been good. I have no complaints at all — it's thanks to them that I've made it this far.”**

**23-year-old Senegalese man in Mali**

**Respondents were divided with regards to how honest their smugglers had been about the journey:** 36% felt they had been intentionally misled about their journey by their smugglers, while 38% did not feel this had been the case. Many described being scammed or stranded by smugglers who disappeared without fulfilling the terms of their agreement.

**“It's been two days that I've been trying to call my smuggler. Either the number doesn't exist or it's unavailable. But I paid all the way to Germany.”**

**25-year-old Gambian man in Niger**

**“I was told to hire smugglers because they would lead and protect us, but when we reached the 'Hill of Death,' some armed men attacked us. The smuggler I had paid ran away into the mountain, abandoning all of us. The attackers robbed us, and I was raped and beaten. [...] That's why I tell people: don't be influenced into paying smugglers. They're scammers.”**

**29-year-old Colombian woman in Costa Rica**

Despite the challenges, **over two thirds of migrants felt that their smugglers had helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country**. This was the case regardless of country of interview: a plurality of respondents always reported feeling that smugglers had helped them achieve their goals.

**Even among those feeling misled (n=18,273), 59% nonetheless acknowledged smugglers had helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country.** Those who felt their smugglers had been honest with them (n=19,137) had more positive perceptions still: 87% said their smugglers had helped them achieve their goals.

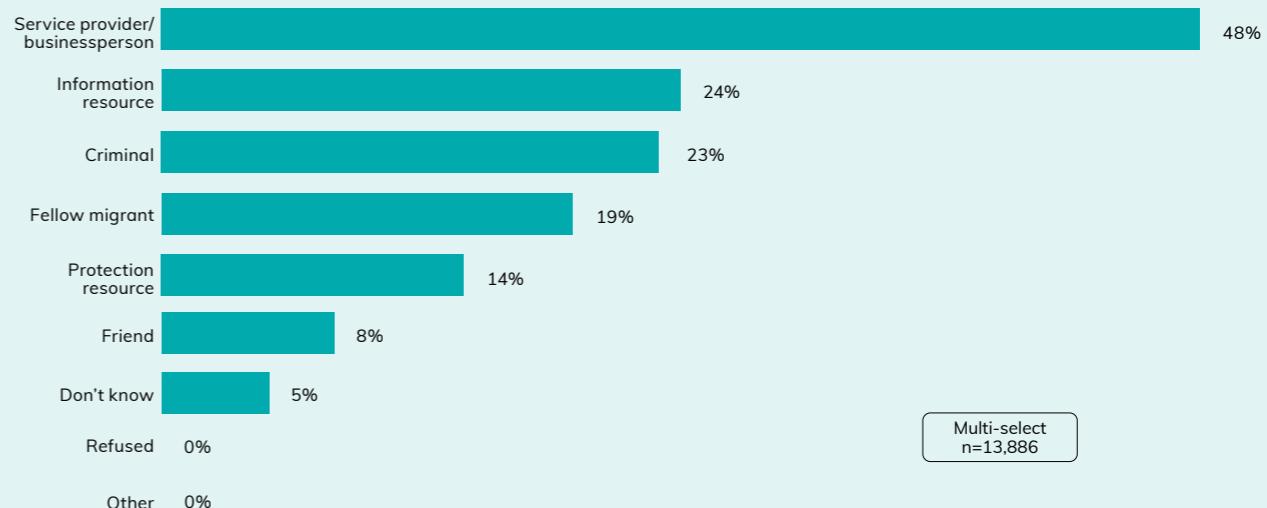
Whether a necessary evil or simply a necessary service, **smugglers certainly fill a crucial gap in the market for cross-border movement, responding to a strong demand for migration in the absence of alternative legal pathways**. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in Yemen: although 82% of migrants felt misled and nearly half described smugglers as criminals, 70% said they had helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country.

#### Perceptions of smuggler vary sharply by route and nationality

Respondents travelling along certain routes had different perceptions of how honest their smugglers had been: among respondents travelling from Syria to Türkiye (n=531), only 7% felt they had been intentionally misled; likewise, among respondents travelling from Afghanistan to Indonesia (n=474), just 10% felt misled. Conversely, this was the case for 82% of respondents who had travelled from the Horn of Africa to Yemen (n=1,999).

#### Migrant data in focus

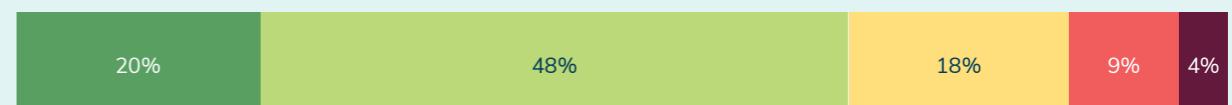
##### Smuggling module: How would you describe your smuggler or smugglers?



**“I can't say that all smugglers are bad, but ... there are several who pretend to be good but really aren't. My advice to others is: if you plan to migrate, be very selective when hiring a smuggler — not all of them can be trusted.”**

**26-year-old Venezuelan man in Costa Rica**

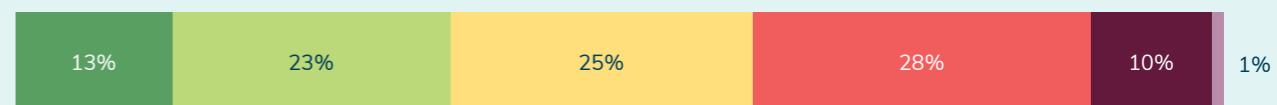
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “The smuggler or smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country”



n=50,199

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Refused

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers”



n=50,199

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Refused

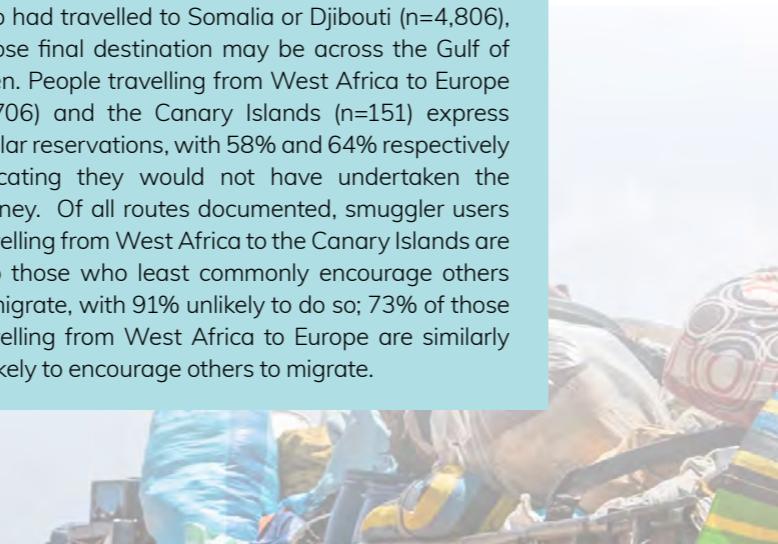
## How do smuggling experiences influence refugees and migrants' views of their journey?

Although smuggler users generally perceive smugglers as a key to the success of their migration journey, they nonetheless have much more negative perceptions of their experiences than those who travelled without smugglers. Just 57% of smuggler users say they would have started their journey knowing what they do now, compared to 71% of migrants travelling without smugglers. Similarly, only 39% of smuggler users consider themselves likely or very likely to encourage others to migrate as they did, compared to 50% of non-smuggler users.

These more negative perceptions of migration are not necessarily caused by smugglers themselves: **people who employ smugglers to migrate generally do so out of necessity in the face of often difficult and perilous journeys ahead, in the absence of safe and legal alternatives.** That people travelling with smugglers have more negative perceptions of migration in general, therefore, could well be a result of the additional hurdles faced along the journey.

### Negative migration experiences among smuggler users

Among smuggler users, those travelling along certain routes have more negative perceptions than others. Notably, among those who travelled from the Horn of Africa to Yemen (n=1,999), 66% say they would not have started the journey knowing what they know now; this is also the case for 60% of those who had travelled to Somalia or Djibouti (n=4,806), whose final destination may be across the Gulf of Aden. People travelling from West Africa to Europe (n=706) and the Canary Islands (n=151) express similar reservations, with 58% and 64% respectively indicating they would not have undertaken the journey. Of all routes documented, smuggler users travelling from West Africa to the Canary Islands are also those who least commonly encourage others to migrate, with 91% unlikely to do so; 73% of those travelling from West Africa to Europe are similarly unlikely to encourage others to migrate.



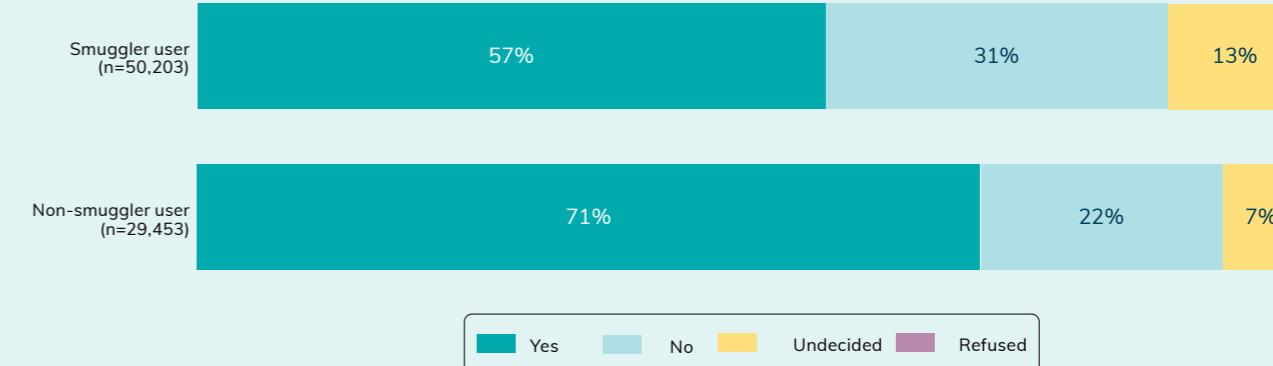
#### Photo credit:

© Francois-Xavier Ada/IOM, 2023

Migrants fleeing violence in Darfur cross the Chad-Sudan border in Adre in June 2023.

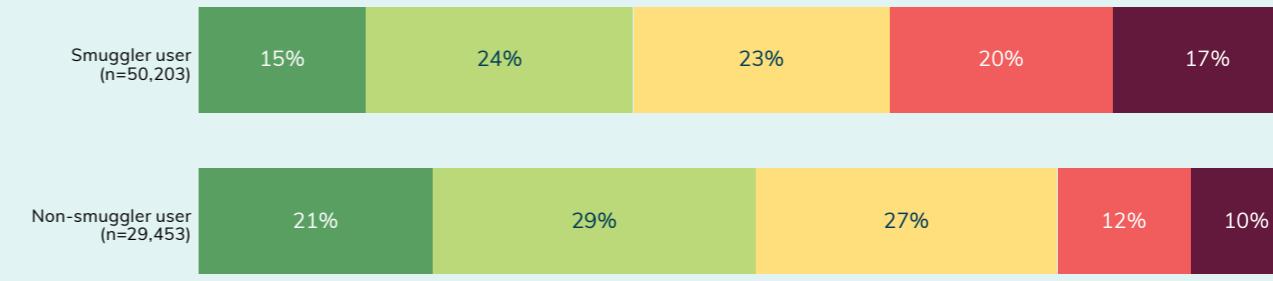
### Migrant data in focus

#### Would you have started the journey knowing what you know now? By smuggler use



■ Yes ■ No ■ Undecided ■ Refused

#### How likely are you to encourage others to migrate as you have, knowing what you know now? By smuggler use



■ Very likely ■ Likely ■ Neutral ■ Unlikely ■ Very unlikely ■ Refused



# Conclusion

Drawing upon over 80,000 interviews with people on the move along key mixed migration routes around the world and more than 450 interviews with smugglers in West and North Africa, this report has sought to unpack the drivers/motivations, operations, the impact of migrant smuggling for migrants and the impact of anti-smuggling policies on smugglers and their business.

Migrant smuggling emerges as a complex and adaptive system, sustained by persistent demand in the face of limited opportunities for legal migration. Contrary to popular beliefs, migrants rarely feel coerced into using smugglers, and often see them as essential, if risky, facilitators in the absence of safer alternatives. Yet those who rely on smugglers face greater risks of harm, including violence, extortion, and exploitation.

Smugglers themselves are primarily motivated by profit, with incomes far exceeding the average national income. In many contexts, smuggling has become central to local economies, especially where other livelihoods are scarce. Enforcement measures are inconsistently applied and often circumvented through corruption. Such measures also contribute to increasing both the costs and the risks of migration as smuggling networks adapt to the realities of stricter border controls.

Ultimately, smugglers are viewed by refugees and migrants sometimes as criminals, sometimes as protectors, but most often as necessary service providers. Even those who feel misled by their smugglers concur: smugglers help achieve the goal of migrating to another country. Although people travelling with smugglers have more negative migration experiences and face a greater risk of harm, demand for smuggling services will continue for as long as people are forced into irregular channels by the absence of alternative regular pathways. In the words of one migrant surveyed:

**“If governments provided safe migration, people would go to safe places legally without having to take many risks.”**  
**56-year-old Afghan man in Pakistan**

**Photo credit:**

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Migrants walk near the wall that will serve as the U.S.-Mexico border, protected by a fence.



# Recommendations

## 1. Move beyond enforcement-only approaches

Smuggling networks adapt—and often thrive—under restrictive policies. Enforcement and prosecution remain essential, particularly against those responsible for aggravated smuggling, violence, or loss of life. However, strategies narrowly focused on “disrupting business models” or “smashing gangs” overlook the underlying supply-and-demand dynamics of smuggling. Such strategies, rather than break tend to boost the business model of smugglers, and can result in the criminalisation of migrants and humanitarian actors. Enforcement must therefore form part of a broader, more comprehensive approach that addresses both the demand for irregular migration and smugglers services and supply of such services by smugglers.

## 2. Address demand by expanding safe and regular migration options

Reducing reliance on smugglers requires genuine, accessible alternatives to irregular movement. States and partners should in parallel, so not sequentially:

- Implement whole-of-route approaches along major migration corridors, establishing centres that offer assistance, protection, and reliable information on and access to regular migration opportunities, as well as return counselling and support. Models such as the Safe Mobility Offices in the Americas could be expanded and adapted to other mixed migration contexts.
- Ensure fair, fast, and efficient asylum procedures at external borders, supported by equitable relocation mechanisms within destination regions.
- Scale up resettlement programmes beyond symbolic quotas to provide meaningful access to protection.
- Expand regular labour migration pathways, aligning them with labour-market needs and making them accessible to migrants across different skill levels.
- Finally, and crucially, ensuring that there are timely, efficient, scalable but fair and dignified return processes for those without a legal right to stay. Significantly expanding regular migration channels could also unlock cooperation from origin countries on returns – stressing again why this all needs to be done in parallel, not sequentially.

## 3. Target the real enablers of supply

Anti-smuggling measures should prioritise structural and high-impact areas rather than visible, low-level actors. Governments and international partners should:

- Confront corruption and collusion among officials that enable irregular migration and allow smugglers to operate with impunity.
- Support alternative livelihoods in border and transit communities where smuggling constitutes a major income source, integrating these with local development and governance initiatives.
- Focus law-enforcement efforts on those running and profiting from smuggling networks, using intelligence-led operations to dismantle financial and logistical control hubs instead of criminalising people on the move or humanitarian responders.



The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a knowledge centre engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programming on mixed migration. MMC has regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with a global team headquartered in Geneva and based in several countries worldwide.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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