



Mixed
Migration
Centre



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Smuggling and mixed migration Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection

This is the first in a planned series of state-of-play knowledge papers that address topical mixed migration issues and present key messages drawn from MMC's research, expert analysis, and 4Mi data.

The movement of refugees and migrants along mixed migration routes around the world is often wholly or partially facilitated by smugglers. Human smuggling has therefore been a primary focus of the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC). This paper synthesizes our key insights and sets out six key messages on smuggling, based on a decade of extensive research and expert analysis, including more than 85,000 4Mi surveys of refugees and migrants and hundreds of 4Mi surveys with smugglers.

Introduction

The issue of human smuggling takes centre stage in responses to and policy discussion around the irregular movements of refugees and migrants. Countries around the world continue to invest significant resources to curb the smuggling of refugees and migrants, despite mixed results and far-reaching consequences beyond the intended reduction of irregular border crossings.

Smuggling is a polarising topic and public and policy discussions commonly lack a balanced perspective. How smugglers are portrayed is often determined by underlying positions in the broader debate around migration: they are either heartless criminals, almost single-handedly responsible for the very existence of irregular mixed migration flows and for all abuses of refugees and migrants, or benign travel agents who help refugees and migrants to fulfil their aspirations for a better life in a context of shrinking international protection space, increasingly restrictive migration policies and a lack of legal migration channels. Nuance and evidenced-based policies are notable for their absence.

Moreover, human smuggling is often conflated with crimes such as human trafficking and terrorism to justify ever more criminalised responses to migrant smuggling and, by harmful extension, to irregular migration itself. Even well-meaning citizens who assist refugees and migrants on the move with basic services such as food and water risk criminal prosecution in some countries. This conflation has also contributed to the increasing militarisation of border controls, which renders crossings more and more dangerous for refugees and migrants.

Meanwhile, the drivers of mixed migration persist, while legal migration channels remain limited or unavailable for many prospective migrants. Consequently, there is sustained demand for smuggling activities, with smugglers often adapting their routes, prices, and business models in response to evolving border policies and law enforcement efforts.

These dynamics have serious ramifications for the protection of people on the move. Ever more dependent on smugglers for access to information, choice of routes and means of transportation, and with smugglers taking more dangerous routes to circumvent authorities, refugees and migrants face increasing risks. This has been observed along some mixed migration routes during the Covid-19 pandemic: as border closures and movement restrictions hampered travel within and across countries, refugees' and migrants' demand for and dependency on smugglers increased, smuggling fees rose, and smugglers chose more dangerous routes.

Smuggling: a core topic for MMC

Over the years, the MMC (and its predecessor, the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat) has conducted extensive research on different aspects and characteristics of human smuggling across different regions and settings. Our flagship data collection program, 4Mi, through which MMC has surveyed more than 85,000 refugees and migrants since 2014, includes a range of questions on their interaction with smugglers.¹ Further, MMC conducts 4Mi surveys with smugglers themselves. Findings have been published extensively in research reports, 4Mi snapshots, articles and presentations that offer new evidence-based insights and challenge simplistic assumptions.² The aim is to supply the nuance and empirical evidence that is so lacking from polarised policy debates.

1 More information about 4Mi can be found [here](#). Specific 4Mi data and analysis supporting the insights presented in this knowledge paper can be found in the many publications cited, as well through [4Mi Interactive](#).

2 See [MMC resources on human smuggling](#).

Beyond its data collection, analysis, and research activities, the MMC continuously engages with other agencies and experts on the topic of smuggling through regular briefings and presentations as well as our partnership with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). We are engaged in migration fora such as the Rabat Process and the Khartoum Process, and work with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), including by providing data on migrant smuggling for its Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, launched in May 2021.³ The topic of human smuggling also features prominently in MMC's annual reports, the Mixed Migration Review.

Considering, among other things, the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 crisis on human mobility and smuggling, and the nascent 2021-2025 EU action plan against migrant smuggling, human smuggling is and remains a pressing issue of global concern.⁴

MMC's understanding of 'smuggler' and 'smuggling'

MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and 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 refugees' and 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. MMC prefers to use the term 'human smuggling' instead of 'migrant smuggling' as smuggling involves both refugees and migrants.

The need for nuance

In parallel to a disproportionate emphasis in public discourse on the phenomenon of mixed migration, particularly over the past five years, contradictory and oversimplistic narratives around smugglers have emerged. This dichotomy glosses over the obvious fact that smugglers are neither all malignant criminals nor all benign travel agents/service providers. Too often, where people stand in the migration debate determines how they view smugglers.

Both angels and demons

Undoubtedly, human smuggling is often accompanied by violent and exploitative practices that show a blatant disregard for fundamental rights and have long-lasting negative impacts on refugees and migrants. Specifically, the deaths of refugees and migrants along mixed migration routes often occur directly or indirectly at the hands of smugglers.⁵ At the same time, smuggling activities do not occur in a vacuum, and undoubtedly thrive on the lack of timely and accessible legal migration channels. In many situations, smugglers are the only recourse refugees and migrants have to cross borders to find safety. Many smugglers, for a fee, provide exactly that service without any violence and without exploiting their 'clients'. In other words: some smugglers are angels, some are demons, and many are something in between. This spectrum is reflected across 4Mi data: most survey respondents state that smugglers helped them to achieve their goal of migrating to another country — a crucial step towards finding protection or fulfilling their life aspirations — while at the same time frequently citing them as the primary perpetrators of protection violations.⁶

3 See [here](#) for details of the Rabat Process and [here](#) for information on the Khartoum Process and [here](#) to learn about the UNODC's observatory.

4 European Commission (2021) [Fighting migrant smuggling: 2021-2025 EU action plan](#). This plan is a key element of the EU's [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#).

5 Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. (2018) [Both Angels and Demons? The role and nature of migrant smugglers](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

6 Horwood, C., Frouws, B. & Forin, R. (Eds.) (2019) [Mixed Migration Review 2019, Highlights, Interviews, Essays, Data](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

Simplistic narratives lead to inadequate responses

Government policies and public rhetoric increasingly focus on the violent nature of human smuggling while simultaneously presenting the 'war against smuggling' to the public as a magic bullet for reducing irregular migration. This myopic approach ignores the complex nature of smuggling operations and the highly diverse nature of smuggling activities, which can vary between countries and along routes. It also risks extending the notion of criminality to refugees and migrants themselves and in some cases even to citizens showing solidarity with and helping those on the move.⁷ This is further elaborated later in this paper.

Oversimplistic narratives also distract from the complexities of mixed migration's wide range of drivers, the lack of rule of law along key routes, and the unavailability of legal avenues for refugees and migrants.

But while human smuggling only exists because of the dearth of such avenues, it would be naïve to assume that simply increasing their availability would automatically end human smuggling. In the absence of a world with no borders, it is unlikely that any such increase would be sufficient to meet migratory demand. Ergo, there would still be a market for smugglers. At the same time, this does not imply that the governments that stand in the way of global free movement can be blamed for the violence and disregard for human life exhibited by a significant number of smugglers.

In short, smuggling often offers refugees and migrants their only viable path out of insecurity or poverty but also often undermines the rule of law and puts refugees and migrants at great risk.

Key message 1:

To design adequate policy responses to human smuggling, a balanced and nuanced narrative on smugglers and smuggling is essential. Human smuggling involves many different profiles and roles. Too often, where people stand in the migration debate defines whether smugglers are portrayed as malicious criminals or benign travel agents.

Corruption and state authorities

Abuses perpetrated against refugees and migrants in the context of human smuggling often occur in an environment of impunity, with the involvement and collusion of state officials. The role of the collusion and corruption needed to facilitate smuggling is insufficiently addressed in policy responses.

Graft is endemic

Corruption is associated with smuggling on routes in many parts of the world.⁸ 4Mi data shows that people travelling on mixed migration routes frequently encounter corrupt state authorities, whom they, or their smugglers, must bribe to continue their journey.⁹ Smugglers surveyed by 4Mi between 2017 and 2019 indicated a high level of involvement of state officials in their smuggling activities: 40% of all respondents stated that someone in their smuggling network had direct contact with state officials to facilitate smuggling; 21% said that officials were directly involved; while 29% said officials were not directly involved but turned a blind eye to smuggling.¹⁰

Protectors as predators

Moreover, while smugglers are often the number one perpetrators of violence against refugees and migrants, state officials are often cited as the second most frequent perpetrators of abuse and even, along some routes, as the most frequent. As such, they should also be held accountable.¹¹

Key message 2:

The role state officials play in allowing smugglers to operate with impunity, as well as their involvement and collusion in perpetrating abuses against refugees and migrants, must be better investigated and perpetrators should be held accountable.

7 Horwood, C., Frouws, B. & Forin, R. (Eds.) (2019) op. cit.

8 UNODC (2018) op. cit.

9 Frouws, B., & Brenner, Y. (2019) [A persistent reality: the role of corruption in mixed migration](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

10 Frouws, B., Brenner, Y. (2019) op. cit.

11 Breen, D. (2020) '[On this journey, no one cares if you live or die](#)'. Mixed Migration Centre. See also UN (2017) [Unlawful death of refugees and migrants](#).

The war on human smuggling

The extent to which smuggling networks resemble highly hierarchical organised crime networks has often been exaggerated. More often, smuggling networks consist of many loosely connected individuals playing a wide range of roles in complex relationships.¹²

The single word 'smuggler' is widely applied to any among the gamut of actors involved in getting people from one place to another, be they negotiators, recruiters, intermediaries or 'guides' — who are often refugees and migrants — or higher-level decisionmakers, who tend to be nationals of the countries in which they operate.

Mission creep

The prevalent narratives of 'breaking the business model' of human smuggling and the 'war on smuggling' have led to a growing criminalisation of mixed migration in general.¹³ In fact, the criminalisation of migrant smuggling has expanded to target refugees and migrants themselves and, as noted above, even led to the prosecution of people who assist them out of simple goodwill rather than monetary gain.¹⁴

In addition, in some contexts, counter-smuggling activities and the more general externalisation of migration management have harmed the economies of entire cities and regions, especially in transit hubs with once-flourishing migration economies.¹⁵ If not accompanied by the development of sufficient and feasible livelihood opportunities, this trend risks creating more instability and exacerbating some of the very factors that drive people to migrate in the first place, paradoxically leading to potentially higher levels of irregular migration as well as frustration and increased risks for those still engaging smugglers who, in turn, are taking more dangerous routes.¹⁶

In short, anti-smuggling initiatives sometimes serve as a smokescreen for efforts to curb irregular migration, which in itself can be a legitimate objective, but one that needs a much more holistic approach, incorporating other policy aspects around legal migration, visa and return policies, and trade agreements.¹⁷

Key message 3:

The simplistic narrative of the 'war on smuggling' ignores the inherent complexity of smuggling and serves as a useful smokescreen for efforts to curb irregular migration. It leads to potentially fewer but better-organised criminal networks and to increasingly criminalised policy responses to irregular migration. This approach is likely to increase the vulnerability of those on the move and risks increasing instability in origin and transit countries.

12 However, as with the war on drugs, it seems that the harder the fight against migrant smuggling is waged, the more concentrated and organised criminal actors become. See: Brenner, Y., Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. (2019) Taking root. [The complex economics of the global smuggling economy](#). Mixed Migration Centre; Horwood, C. (2019) [The new 'public enemy number one'- comparing and contrasting the war on drugs and the emerging war on migrant smugglers](#). Mixed Migration Centre; Malakooti, A., & Fall, C. (2020) [Migration Trends Across the Mediterranean: Piercing Together the Shifting Dynamics](#). Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Clingendael Institute; and IOM (2016) [Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base](#).

13 Mixed Migration Centre (2019) [The ever-rising securitisation of mixed migration](#).

14 Horwood, C., Frouws, B. & Forin, R. (Eds.) (2019) op. cit.

15 Such as Agadez in Niger. See Golovko, E. (2019) [Players of many parts – The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa's migration economy](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

16 Tubiana J., Warin C. & Saeneen, G.M. (2018) [Multilateral Damage - The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes](#). Clingendael Reports. See also: Euromesco (2021) [Beyond Networks, Militias and Tribes: Rethinking EU Counter-Smuggling Policy and Response](#)

17 Horwood, C. (2019) [The new 'public enemy number one' - Comparing and contrasting the war on drugs and the emerging war on migrant smugglers](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

Trafficking vs smuggling

The lines between human trafficking and migrant smuggling can be blurred, especially in cases of 'aggravated smuggling'¹⁸ or when smugglers exploit their 'clients'. On many mixed migration routes, 4Mi data shows that smugglers engage in trafficking-like activities, such as kidnapping and extortionate detention for financial gain, sexual exploitation, or forced labour.¹⁹

However, there are important distinctions between human smuggling and trafficking. For example, being identified as a victim of human trafficking has specific legal implications in terms of access to protection and assistance.²⁰

Another smokescreen?

Too often, media and policymakers conflate human trafficking and smuggling, or even use the terms interchangeably. Policymakers might do this deliberately, since portraying smuggling as trafficking helps to justify a tough and criminalised approach to irregular migration, as discussed above. Lumping together the two crimes of smuggling and trafficking reinforces the narrative of the nefarious smuggler and ignores the agency of refugees and migrants.

Trafficking-like crimes on mixed migration routes

However, the legal distinction between human smuggling and human trafficking in the context of mixed migration is not always easy to draw.²¹ Along risky and lengthy journeys, smuggling might morph into trafficking when refugees and migrants find themselves deceived into exploitative situations.²² In Libya, it seems that the economies of human smuggling and trafficking groups are increasingly connected.²³ In the context of migrant smuggling towards Europe, the risk of human trafficking can be 'exacerbated by difficulties in onward travel, lack of regular status and lack of access to the formal labour market.'²⁴ In this context, it is also increasingly difficult to identify migrants as victims of trafficking.²⁵

Key message 4:

Human trafficking and human smuggling are different phenomena, even if they overlap. The two should not be deliberately conflated to justify a tough and criminalised approach to human smuggling. However, it should also be recognised that the lines between smuggling and trafficking can be blurry. It is crucial to step up the response against 'aggravated smuggling' and to hold smugglers who are perpetrators of human rights violations accountable.

18 "Aggravated smuggling" is defined by article 6 (3) of the [UNODC Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants](#) as acts "(a) That endanger, or are likely to endanger, the lives or safety of the migrants concerned; or (b) That entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants."

19 Horwood, C. & Forin, R. (2019) [Everyone's prey: Kidnapping and extortionate detention in mixed migration](#). Mixed Migration Centre

20 UNODC (2018) [Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants](#)

21 Carling, J., Gallagher A. & Horwood, C. (2015) op. cit.

22 UNODC (2018) op. cit.

23 Global Initiative Against Organized Crime (2018) [Responding to the Human Trafficking-Migrant Smuggling Nexus](#).

24 Healy, C. (2019). [The Strength to Carry On: Resilience and Vulnerability to Trafficking and Other Abuses among People Travelling along Migration Routes to Europe](#). ICMPD.

25 UNODC (2018) op. cit.

Smugglers' exaggerated influence

Public and policy discourse overstates the extent to which smugglers encourage irregular migration. 4Mi data shows rather that smugglers play a very limited role in swaying people's decision to migrate, which are more usually influenced by close social connections, such as friends and/or family, including those (already) abroad.²⁶

However, as noted above, after the decision to migrate has been taken, and once people are on the move, they generally become increasingly dependent on smugglers for information and decision making on routes and means of transport.

Key message 5:

The role of smugglers as those who encourage and fuel irregular migration is overestimated in public and policy discourse.

The impact of Covid-19 on smuggling dynamics

Smugglers and smuggling networks continuously adapt their operations to external circumstances.²⁷ The socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is both driving and limiting cross-border movement.²⁸ Additionally, Covid-19 related restrictions also affected movement within countries.

4Mi data indicates that, as a result of the pandemic, demand for smugglers has increased, their prices have risen, and smugglers are using more dangerous routes.²⁹

This increased reliance on smugglers for cross-border movement will likely exacerbate the vulnerability to protection incidents of refugees and migrants on the move.³⁰

Key message 6:

Covid-19 has generally increased the demand for smugglers, decreased access to smugglers, increased prices charged by smugglers and led to the use of more dangerous routes. This has exacerbated vulnerabilities for refugees and migrants on the move and is a trend that must be closely monitored.

²⁶ Golovko, E. (2018) op. cit. See also MMC Europe (2021) [Smuggling dynamics for Afghans on the move toward Europe](#)

²⁷ Bird, L. (2020) [Human smuggling in Africa: The creation of a new criminalized economy?](#) ENACT.

²⁸ Linekar, J., Litzkow J. (2021) [One year into the pandemic: Covid-19 a threat multiplier for people on the move.](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion

This paper took stock of and synthesised key insights from a decade of MMC research, expert analysis, and data collection on human smuggling as a key feature of mixed migration. Based on these insights, it presented six targeted key messages that we consider crucial for much-needed nuance and evidence-based discussions on human smuggling. In line with our overall strategic objectives, this paper should contribute to advancing the understanding of human smuggling and mixed migration and to evidence-based policies and programmatic responses to smuggling that are based on rational knowledge, discernment, and evidence, rather than assumptions, feelings, and political positions.

These messages are not meant to be set in stone or mark the end of our extensive focus on human smuggling. Knowledge and insights should always evolve. We will surely gain new insights over the years to come. As such, these key messages are an invitation to challenge received wisdoms, so that we — in partnership with other agencies, research institutions, think tanks and, importantly, refugees and migrants themselves — continue to advance our understanding of human smuggling and mixed migration. We truly believe that this will lead to better policies and responses that address human smuggling in all its aspects, while always championing the protection and human rights of migrants and refugees.

Annex 1.

A selection of MMC key resources on human smuggling

4Mi Interactive portals

Mixed migration during Covid-19, including on how smuggling has been affected:

<https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/mixed-migration-during-covid-19/>

Data on mixed migration from ongoing 4Mi interviews, including on the role of smugglers:

<https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/data-on-mixed-migration/>

4Mi snapshots

MMC (2020): [COVID-19 Global Thematic Update#1 1 September 2020- Impact of COVID-19 on migrant smuggling](#)

MMC (2021): [MMC Europe 4Mi Snapshot: Smuggling dynamics for Afghans on the move toward Europe](#)

MMC (2020): [MMC LAC 4Mi Snapshot: Refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico – a focus on smuggling during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

MMC (2020): [MMC Asia 4Mi Snapshot: The impact of COVID-19 on the smuggling of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan](#)

MMC (2020): [MMC North Africa 4Mi Snapshot: The role of smuggles in East Africans' mixed migration to Libya via Sudan](#)

Find [here](#) all 4Mi snapshots with a focus on human smuggling:

Articles

MMC (2019): [The ever-rising securitization of mixed migration](#)

MMC (2019): [A persistent reality: the role of corruption in mixed migration](#)

MMC (2019): [Taking root. The complex economics of the global smuggling economy.](#)

MMC (2018): [Both angels and demons? The role and nature of migrant smugglers](#)

MMC (2017): [New Trend/Old Tactics: War revives brutal smuggler practices in the Gulf of Aden](#)

Reports and papers

MMC and UNHCR (2021): [A Roadmap for Advocacy, Policy Development, and Programming](#)

MMC (2021): [Mixed migration and migrant smuggling in Libya: the role of non-Libyan smuggler intermediaries](#)

MMC and UNHCR (2020): [‘On this journey, no one cares if you live or die’](#)

MMC (2019): [Everyone's prey: Kidnapping and extortionate detention in mixed migration](#)

MMC (2019): [Players of many parts: The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa's migration economy](#)

MMC (2019): [Comparing and contrasting the war on drugs and the emerging war on migrant smugglers](#)

RMMS (2017): [Unpacking the Myths: Human smuggling from and within the Horn of Africa](#)

RMMS (2017): [Human Smuggling – No victimless crime: voices from those on the move](#)

RMMS (2017): [Smuggled South: An updated overview of mixed migration from the Horn of Africa to southern Africa with specific focus on protections risks, human smuggling and trafficking](#)

RMMS (2015): [Beyond Definitions: Global migration and the smuggling–trafficking nexus](#)

RMMS (2013): [Migrant smuggling in the Horn of Africa and Yemen: The political economy and protection risks](#)

Find [here](#) all MMC reports and papers with a focus on human smuggling:

MMC's annual 'Mixed Migration Review', including data, essays and interviews on human smuggling

MMC (2019): [Mixed Migration Review 2020](#)

MMC (2019): [Mixed Migration Review 2019](#)

MMC (2019): [Mixed Migration Review 2018](#)



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

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

The views set out in this report are those of the Mixed Migration Centre and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Refugee Council or any of the donors supporting the work of MMC or this report. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with the MMC

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Front cover photo credit: © Sven Torfinn/Panos
A man from Niger about to board a truck with about 150 other migrants travelling between Agadez and the border, bound for Libya or Algeria.