

The role of smuggling in Venezuelans' journey to Colombia and Peru

Smuggling¹ is a polarizing topic and public and policy discussions on the issue often are often based on assumptions rather than evidence and lack a nuanced and balanced perspective.² The journey of Venezuelan refugees and migrants is often facilitated by smugglers. This snapshot offers an analysis of the smuggling activities used by respondents interviewed in Peru and Colombia, and how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the use of smugglers. It aims to contribute towards a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of refugees and migrants in the country.

Key findings

- Most respondents (69%) used smuggling services during their journey.
- The use of smuggling increased from 60% among respondents interviewed in 2019 to 81% among those surveyed in 2021.
- Smugglers go beyond facilitating border crossings: they also provide transportation within countries (38%), negotiate with authorities (16%), and provide water, food (13%) and (6%).
- While people on the move can see no alternative to using smugglers to migrate, and routes can be riskier otherwise, smugglers can also pose a danger: 26% of respondents identified them as perpetrators of abuse.

¹ 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.

² MMC (2021): [Smuggling and mixed migration: Insight and key messages drawn for a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection](#)

Profiles

The analysis is based on 3,336 surveys conducted in Colombia (2,378 surveys) and Peru (958 surveys). These interviews were carried out in two different time periods: 915 took place between November 2019 and March 2020, and 2,421 between February and September 2021 (see Figure 1).³ 56% of the surveys were conducted by face-to-face interview and 44% by phone.

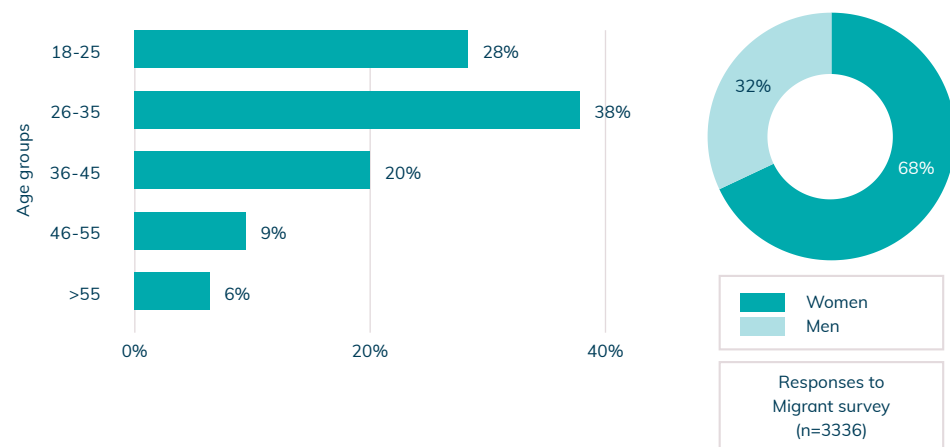
Figure 1. Surveys per trimester

	2019 Trim.4	2020 Trim.1	2021 Trim.1	2021 Trim.2	2021 Trim.3	Total
Colombia	379	383	492	567	557	2378
Peru	43	110	201	318	286	958
Total	422	493	693	885	843	3336

68% of respondents were women and 32% were men. Respondents were more frequently aged between 26 and 35 (38%) and the average age of the sample was 33 years (see Figure 2).

³ Between March 2020 and February 2021, 4Mi implemented a different survey on the impact of Covid-19 for refugees and migrants, which did not include the same questions on smuggling.

Figure 2. Sex and age ranges



At the time of the survey, respondents in Colombia were in Barranquilla (22%), Riohacha (19%), Bogota (19%), Cucuta (16%) and Ipiales (9%), among other cities with lower percentages. In Peru, respondents were in Lima (62%) and Arequipa (35%), among other cities with percentages below 1%.

Smuggling dynamics in the region are complex and involve a diversity of actors: criminal gangs, armed groups participating in the Colombian armed conflict, private citizens or people on the move who see smuggling as an income generating activity as any other, and corrupt authorities. To avoid confusion, 4Mi enumerators explained to respondents that the smuggling of migrants can include all activities connected to the facilitation of crossing borders irregularly or residing irregularly in another country with the aim of making a financial or other material profit,⁴ as respondents often do not identify smuggling activities as such.

Smuggling services used by people on the move can vary between an “all-inclusive package” (organizing all aspects of the journey from the country and place of origin until final destination) to very limited interactions, affecting only a part of the journey.

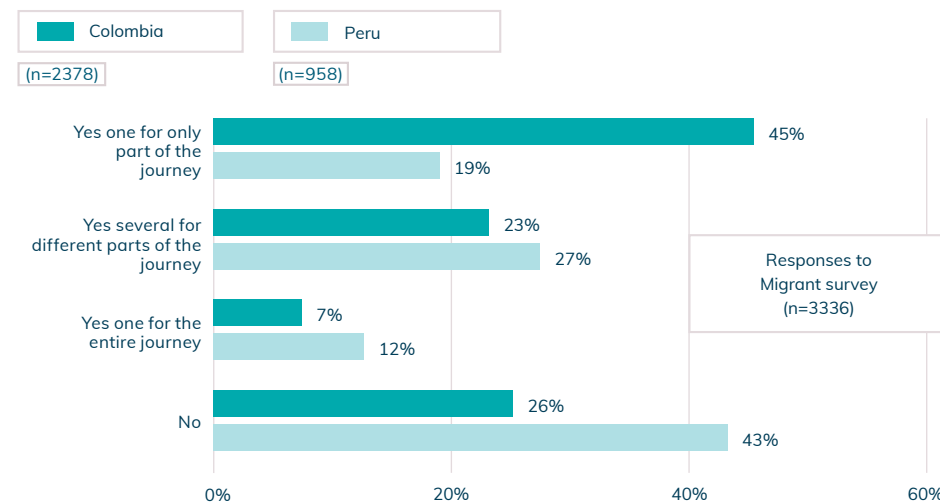
4 UNODC (accessed 2021): [Smuggling of migrants: the harsh search for a better life.](#)

Criminal groups control irregular border crossings, known as “trochas”, between Colombia and Venezuela,⁵ and Colombia and Ecuador. Those criminal groups directly control the smuggling of migrants in those borders. Refugees and migrants who want to use these paths usually have to pay the criminal groups to be allowed to cross and do so safely.

The use of smuggling is common among respondents

69% of respondents contracted a smuggler to facilitate their journey. Of those, 54% used a smuggler for part of the journey, 34% for several parts of the journey and 12% for the entire migration journey. Respondents in Peru reported using smugglers in a lower proportion compared to those in Colombia: 57% versus 74% (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Use of smugglers by survey country



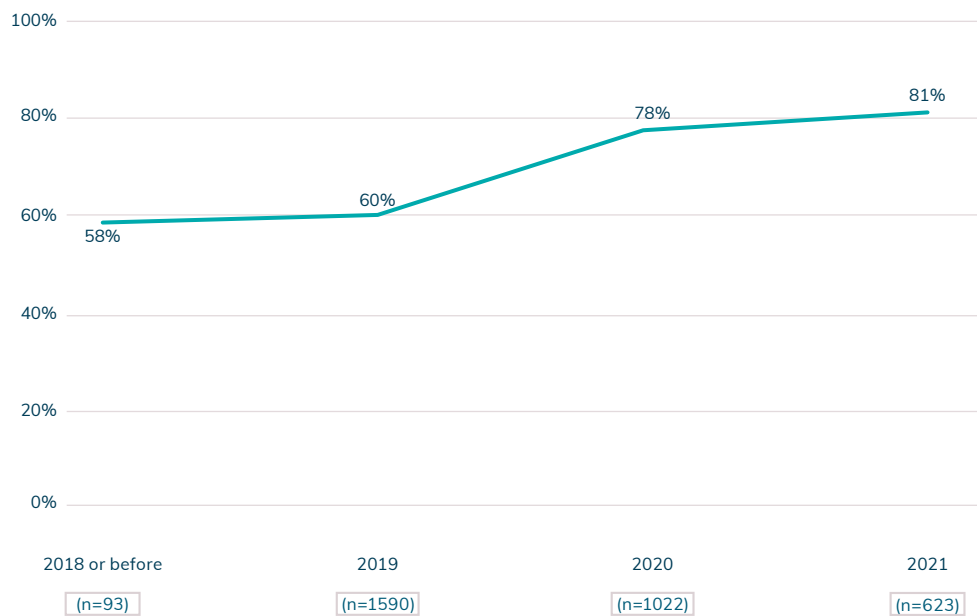
This difference can be at least partially explained by the fact that some respondents hired “travel agents” in Venezuela to facilitate their migration and paid a “full package” to get to Peru. Respondents seldom identify these agents as smugglers, despite their role including the organization of irregular transit across borders. Respondents in Peru are also more reluctant to talk about their interactions with smugglers, compared to those in Colombia.

5 Insightcrime (2019): [Trails Along Colombia-Venezuela Border Are Criminal Enclave](#)

The need for smuggling increased during the COVID-19 pandemic

The use of smugglers was more frequent among respondents who migrated more recently (see Figure 4). There is a significant difference⁶ between the use of smugglers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic: 62% of respondents who migrated before the pandemic (1283/2069) used smugglers, while 81% of those who migrated during the pandemic (1020/1259) did so.

Figure 4. Use of smugglers by year the journey began



Colombia, Ecuador and Peru closed their borders during the Covid-19 pandemic and increased border controls. For most respondents, such restrictions increased the need to hire smugglers to enter those countries through illegal paths, known as “trochas”. Smugglers were considered more able to organize irregular crossing, as they knew how to avoid detection by local authorities or convince them to let people through.

⁶ Significant differences identified throughout this analysis were found through z-tests at the 0.05 level of significance.

“Migrating without documents is very difficult and everything is more complicated because of the pandemic. My journey lasted 10 days. There is a lot of uncertainty along the journey [...]. The trip was tough due to Covid restrictions. The trails are terrible. Smugglers talk to the authorities and bribe them to let us pass. The corruption is terrible. I thought that authorities were only corrupt in Venezuela, but it is the same in all countries”.

27-year-old woman interviewed in Arequipa, Peru.

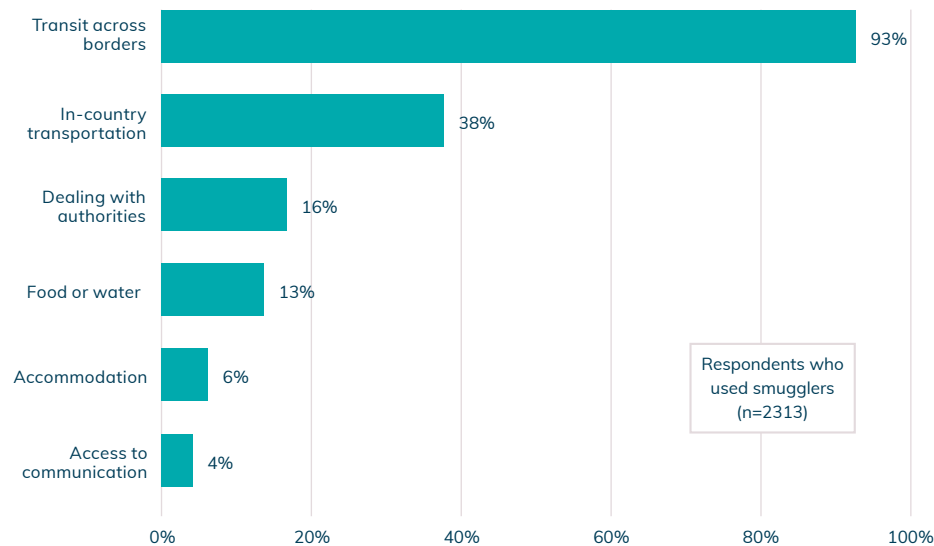
Main smuggling activities are border crossing and travel across countries

Smugglers are mostly used to facilitate border crossing between the different countries along the migration route, as reported by 93% of respondents who used a smuggler.

However, smugglers also provided other types of services. 38% of respondents mentioned that smugglers provided transportation within the country. 16% reported that smugglers had contact with the authorities: according to 4Mi enumerators, smugglers sometimes bribe law enforcement officers to allow people to enter the country irregularly, or to avoid detection at checkpoints within the country.⁷ Respondents also stated that smugglers provided water, food (13%) or accommodation (6%) (see Figure 5).

⁷ Migración Colombia (2020): [Migración Colombia ratifica su lucha contra la corrupción y captura a uno de sus oficiales por concusión y tráfico de migrantes](#); ACAPS (2021): [Necesidades y vulnerabilidades de los migrantes que viajan a pie.](#)

Figure 5. What did the smuggler provide you with?



Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question. 5 answer options of less than 2% were omitted

Respondents in Peru are more likely than respondents in Colombia to use smugglers for more than border crossing. This is for example reflected in the provision of water or food (32% Peru versus 7% Colombia), accommodation (21% Peru versus 1% Colombia), dealing with local authorities (17% Peru versus 12% Colombia), and access to communications such as telephones and internet (8% Peru versus 2% Colombia). This is partly due to the fact that the journey between Venezuela and Peru is longer than the journey between Venezuela and Colombia.

Smuggling: a risk, an opportunity, or both?

The use of smugglers was considered as a necessity for a majority of respondents who migrated to Colombia or Peru, and even more so during the COVID-19 outbreak due to movement restrictions. 90% of respondents who used smugglers mentioned that they helped them in achieving their goal to migrate in another country. According to 4Mi enumerators, respondents often describe smugglers as similar to service providers, especially those who cross the border between Venezuela and Colombia in the northern region of La Guajira: the use of smuggling services to migrate is considered so normal and necessary that some respondents recommend the services of the smugglers they trust to their relatives.

“My journey was easy. It lasted 7 days. The smuggler helped me during the whole trip. We had no problems”.
35-year-old man in Lima, Peru.

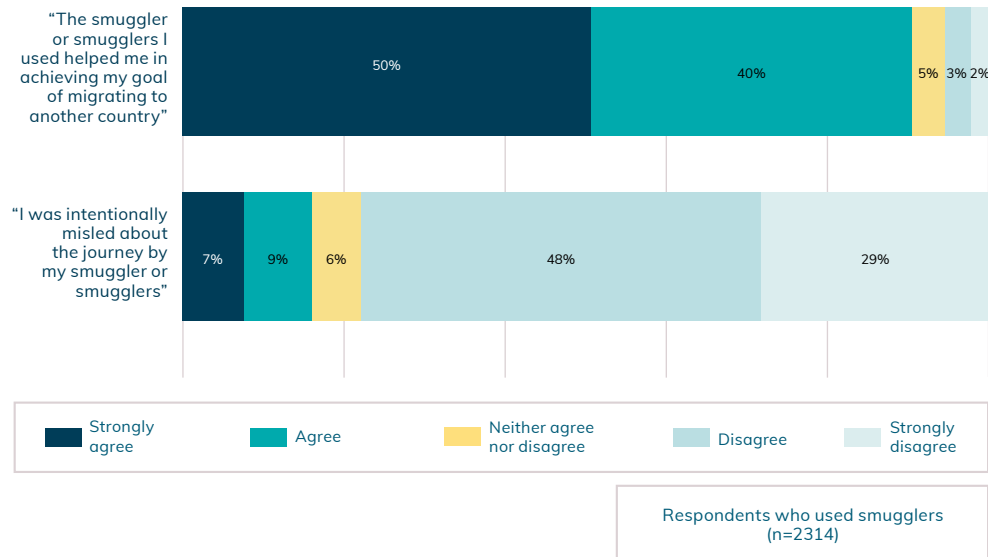
This does not imply, however, a solely positive role of smugglers: they were reported by 26% of respondents (629/2421) as perpetrators of abuse. Additionally, 16% of respondents believed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by their smuggler(s) (see Figure 6). According to 4Mi enumerators, smugglers often promise safety during the journey. However, a considerable proportion of respondents witness or suffer violence along the route, and especially on irregular border crossings:⁸ extortion is frequent, and respondents also reported sexual violence, kidnapping, or physical violence leading to death.⁹

“Recommendations to cross the border: do not carry anything valuable in your suitcases because a paramilitary can check you and find your cash. Find a way to send it before the journey or don’t take it. Women should wear their hair up: in those trails, smugglers drug women and cut their hair to sell it. Women should be as unfeminine as possible.”
25-year-old woman in Barranquilla.

8 MMC (2021): [Protection risks for Venezuelan refugees and migrants](#)

9 El Heraldo (2020): [Trochas en frontera: la ruta para el tráfico de órganos](#)

Figure 6. Smugglers ... help or hindrance?



"The smuggler took my suitcase out of the car and mounted it on a motorcycle with a guy who I thought was going to kill me. That was very scary and dangerous".
61-year-old woman in Barranquilla, Colombia.

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4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

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