

Contact between smugglers and refugees and migrants in West and North Africa

This snapshot focuses on how smugglers¹ and refugees and migrants make contact in West and North Africa. It draws on 3,602 surveys of refugees and migrants who had used a smuggler or smugglers, conducted in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Libya and Tunisia from February 2021 to March 2022. It also draws on 356 smuggler surveys conducted in the same countries over June-October 2021. It provides analysis of the channels and the timing of contact between migrants and smugglers.

This snapshot is produced in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#).



Key findings

- Family and friends are the main channel through which migrants and refugees make contact with smugglers. This was the most frequently cited response by both refugees and migrants (42%) and smugglers (69%).
- Refugees and migrants more often indicated that they approached the smuggler directly (44%) than that the smuggler approached them (13%).

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. This publication is produced in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#). The Observatory uses the word 'smuggler' when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, while the word 'facilitator' is used whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence. www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html.

- Men reported approaching the smuggler more often than women (50% vs 34%)².
- Cross-border contact between smugglers and refugees and migrants is particularly pronounced in Niger, where smugglers report contacting refugees and migrants mostly before their arrival in the country (67%).
- Respondents who left Niger, Chad, and Sudan – central locations on northbound migration routes – reported that contact with smugglers was facilitated by family and friends less frequently than respondents who departed from other West and Central African countries, perhaps because this central location means that people can access smugglers directly more easily, and have less need of an intermediary.

Profiles

This snapshot is based on 3,602 surveys of refugees and migrants who reported using at least one smuggler during their journey up to the point of interview. They were interviewed in Niger (n=988), Libya (n=857), Mali (n=656), Tunisia (n=632) and Burkina Faso (n=469) between February 2021 and March 2022. The majority were men (68%). Respondents departed from a number of countries, see Table 1.

2 The questions cover a number of response options according to means of communication (I approached the smuggler directly by phone; I approached the smuggler directly in person; I approached the smuggler directly over social media and messaging). The analysis here combines these answers.

Table 1. From which country did you start your migration journey?

Country of departure	N	%
Nigeria	622	17%
Mali	286	8%
Côte d'Ivoire	278	8%
Guinea	277	8%
Cameroon	268	7%
Niger	189	5%
Senegal	179	5%
Sudan	167	5%
Benin	164	5%
Togo	161	4%
Burkina Faso	158	4%
Ghana	155	4%
Chad	131	4%

It is also based on 356 surveys with smugglers interviewed in Burkina Faso (n=50), Libya (n=80), Mali (n=75), Niger (n=75) and Tunisia (n=76) conducted between June and October 2021. Most smugglers surveyed were male (89%), and the average age was 38 for men and 40 for women. A large majority (between 83% and 99%) resided in the countries where they were surveyed. The smugglers were surveyed in multiple locations in each survey country³.

³ The main data collection sites in each country included:
Burkina Faso: Dori (20%), Kantchari (18%), Ouagadougou (18%), Bodo-Dioulasso (10%)
Libya: Sabha (30%), Tripoli (25%), Zuwara (13%), Brak (9%), Ajdabiya (7%)
Mali: Timbuktu (21%), Gao (17%), Bamako (15%), Mopti (13%), Kayes (12%), Kidal (11%)
Niger: Agadez (28%), Niamey (21%), Tillaberi (15%), Diffa (9%), N'guigmi (8%), Zinder (5%)
Tunisia: Sfax (64%), Tunis (20%), Ariana (Grand Tunis) (9%)

Family and friends as the main means of contact with smugglers

Figure 1. How did you get in touch with the initial smuggler? (refugee and migrant survey)

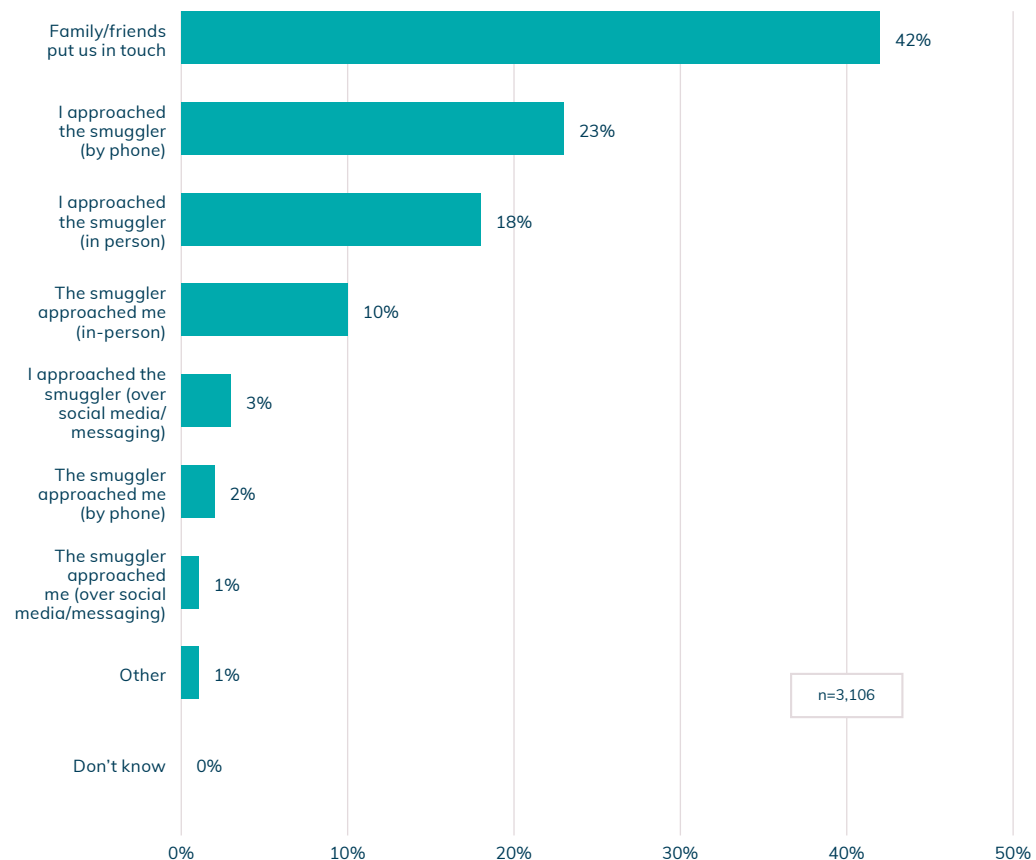
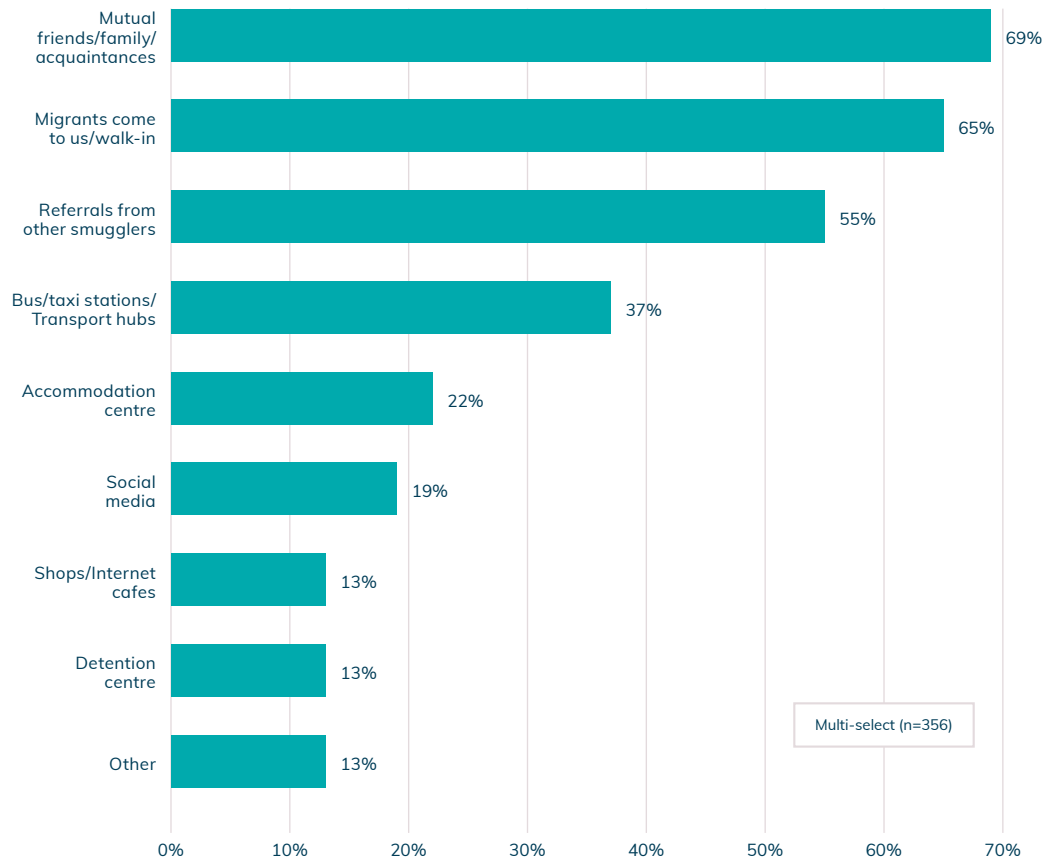


Figure 2. How do you or how does your group first get in touch with migrants? (smuggler survey)



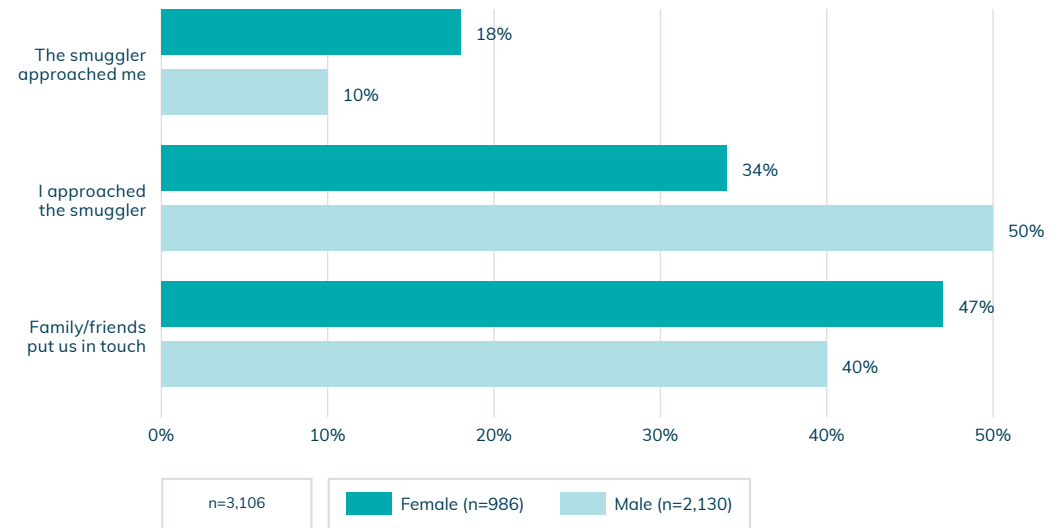
Family and friends are the main channel through which migrants and refugees contact smugglers, cited by 42% of refugees and migrants and 69% of smugglers.

Family and friends as a mean of getting in contact with smugglers was cited more frequently by female respondents (47%) as compared to male respondents (40%, see Figure 3). Women’s greater use of personal networks to make contact with a smuggler may be a means of having greater trust in the smuggler and mitigating risk.

The importance of personal connections is also clearly highlighted by smugglers themselves: 55% of smugglers report receiving referrals of migrants and refugees from other smugglers.

Figure 3. How did you get in touch with the initial smuggler?⁴

Disaggregated by gender



Migrants are proactively approaching smugglers

After contact via family and friends, refugees and migrants most often indicated that they approached the smuggler directly (44%); particularly among male respondents, who reported approaching the smuggler more often than women (50% vs 40%). In the same vein, the majority of smugglers indicated that migrants come to them directly (65%).

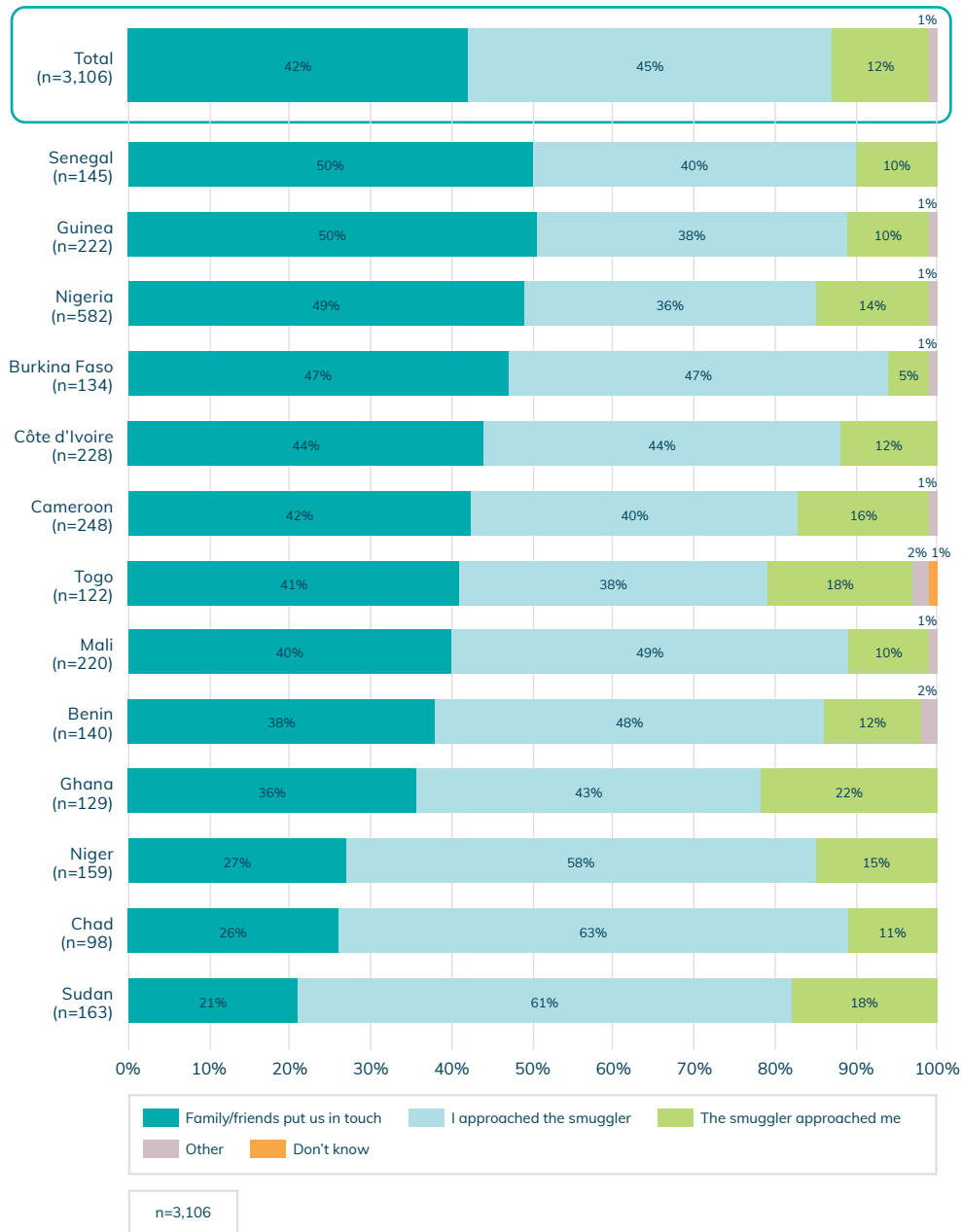
Conversely, refugees and migrants much less frequently reported that they were approached directly by the smuggler (13%). While narratives around the smuggling of migrants often emphasize recruitment on the part of smugglers, these findings support much greater agency on the part of refugees and migrants in seeking out smuggling services.

⁴ The possible answer options were as follows: Family/friends put us in touch; I approached the smuggler directly by phone; I approached the smuggler directly in person; I approached the smuggler directly over social media and messaging; The smuggler approached me directly in-person; The smuggler approached me directly by phone; The smuggler approached me directly over social media and messaging; Other; Don't know. For ease of reading the graph, the three answers related to 'I approached the smuggler' and 'The smuggler approached me' have been grouped together.

Smuggler contact across countries of departure

Figure 4. How did you get in touch with the initial smuggler?

Disaggregated by country of departure

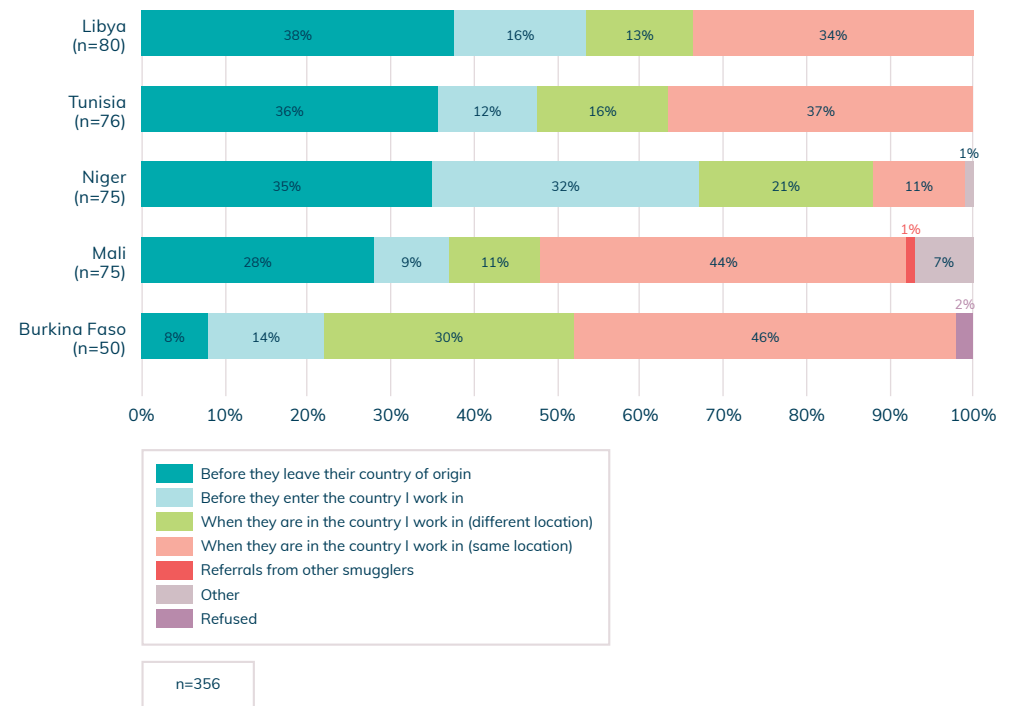


While the way in which refugees and migrants get in touch with smugglers does show some variation depending on the country of departure, no striking trends arise. Respondents who departed from Niger, Chad, and Sudan reported contact facilitated by family and friends less frequently than respondents who departed from other countries. This may be because their central location on routes towards North Africa and Libya in particular means that they have more direct exposure to smugglers – and therefore less need for intermediaries – compared to people in other origin countries further to the south and west.

Timing of first contact between smugglers and refugees and migrants varies

Figure 5. When do you/your group typically first get in touch with migrants?

Per country of interview



In West Africa, the timing of first contact between smugglers and refugees and migrants appears to vary somewhat depending on route. In Burkina Faso and Mali, smugglers most frequently report making contact with refugees and migrants when they are in the same place as each other (46% and 44%). In Niger, by contrast, the trend is different: smugglers report contact with refugees and migrants mostly before their arrival in the country (67%); either before they leave their country of origin (35%) or at another point before they enter Niger (32%).

The results for Niger suggest more of a cross-border dynamic than is seen in its two neighboring countries. The presence of transnational networks operating in and through Niger is well documented, and may be a factor leading to greater contact between smugglers in Niger and migrants who are outside Niger, including in Nigeria.⁵ This dynamic may also be influenced by the crackdown on smuggling that took place in Niger in 2016 with increased enforcement of the country's anti-smuggling law (Loi 2015-36), which drove smuggling underground,⁶ making direct contact between smugglers and migrants and refugees in Niger itself more difficult.

Some of these same transnational dynamics are also seen in Tunisia and Libya, where more than a third of smugglers report being in contact with refugees and migrants before they leave their country of origin. In Libya, for instance, smugglers in the south of the country (Brak, Sabha, etc.) would have had links with migrants before they crossed the desert as they facilitate recruitment south of the border and across the Sahara into Libya.

One third of smugglers report contact with refugees and migrants pre-departure

About a third of surveyed smugglers reported making contact with refugees and migrants before they leave their country of origin (30%). Results vary by only 10% across survey countries (Libya 38%, Tunisia 36%, Niger 35%, Mali 28%), with the exception of Burkina Faso (8%).

Contact prior to departure from the country of origin implies a greater degree of planning, connection, and networking activity. In all survey countries, including Tunisia and Libya,

5 GITOC (2021) [Conflict, Coping and Covid: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020](#)

6 Clingendael & GITOC (2019) [The Human Conveyor Belt Broken: Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel](#)

most refugees and migrants surveyed are from Central or West Africa. Contact between smugglers and migrants prior to leaving their country of departure may be an indication of the reach of the networks and operations of smugglers, but it also could reflect personal connections on the part of migrants and their social networks.

In Burkina Faso, smugglers interviewed reported being in contact with refugees and migrants before they left their country of origin less frequently than smugglers interviewed in all other countries (8%). This could be due to the nature of the smuggler's services: smugglers in Burkina Faso are less likely to engage in large-scale activities such as facilitating the crossing of the Sahara or the Mediterranean, which would be more the case in the other four countries of analysis. These less logistically demanding activities may therefore not require the same level of organization and prior planning for migrants.



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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 Asia and the Pacific, East and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

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