

Smuggling dynamics for Afghans on the move toward Europe

Over the past decade, Afghans lodged the [second highest number of asylum applications](#) worldwide, including the second highest number of asylum applications in [2019](#) and [2020](#) in Europe. Migration journeys of Afghans toward Europe are often made irregularly, wholly, or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.¹ Since early 2019 MMC Europe has been interviewing Afghan refugees and migrants in Greece, to better understand their reasons for leaving Afghanistan, as well as their experiences while on the move towards Europe. The 4Mi survey includes a range of questions on the interaction between smugglers and migrants. This snapshot analyzes smuggling dynamics for Afghans on the move toward Europe with the aim of contributing to evidence-based protection responses and advocacy efforts for people on the move.

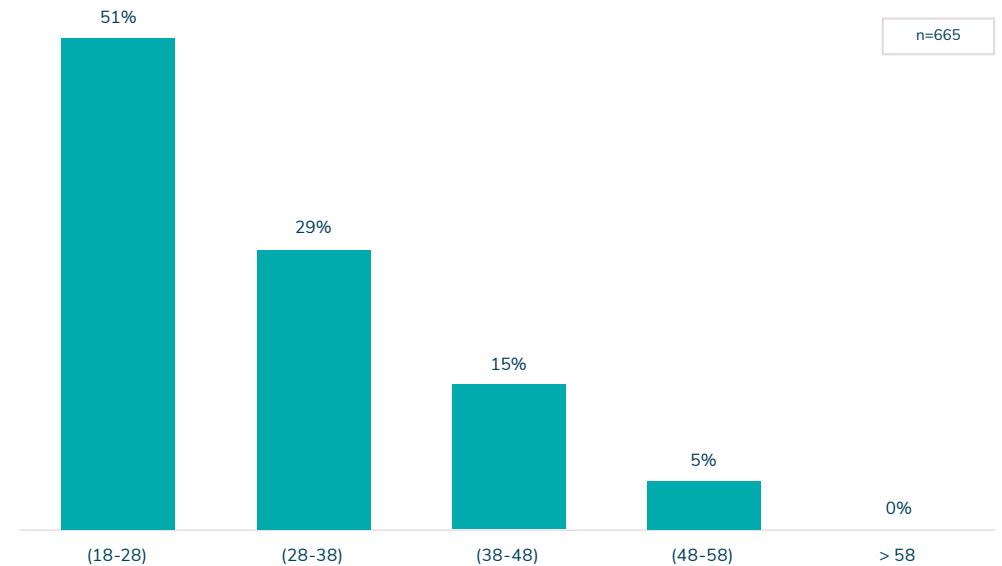
Key findings

- Almost all respondents (99%) indicated that they had used a smuggler at some point in their journey.
- Smugglers play a limited role in Afghan respondents' decision to migrate but act as a key source of information before and during the migration journey.
- The payment modalities for smugglers reflect the fragmented nature of Afghans' journeys towards Europe, with half of the respondents (49%) noting they paid for their journey in installments.
- Most Afghan 4Mi respondents interviewed in Greece agreed or strongly agreed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by their smuggler. However more than half of the respondents (56%) agreed or strongly agreed that using a smuggler has helped in achieving the goal of migrating to another country.

Profiles

Information in this snapshot was collected between 23 November 2019 and 31 December 2020. A total of 665 surveys with Afghan refugees and migrants were conducted. 56% (n=375) of respondents were male, and 44% (n=290) were female. The majority of the respondents were between 18 and 28 years of age at the time of interview. 89% (n=593) were conducted in Athens, 2% (n=14) in Piraeus and 9% (n=58) in Thessaloniki.

Figure 1. Age groups of Afghan respondents

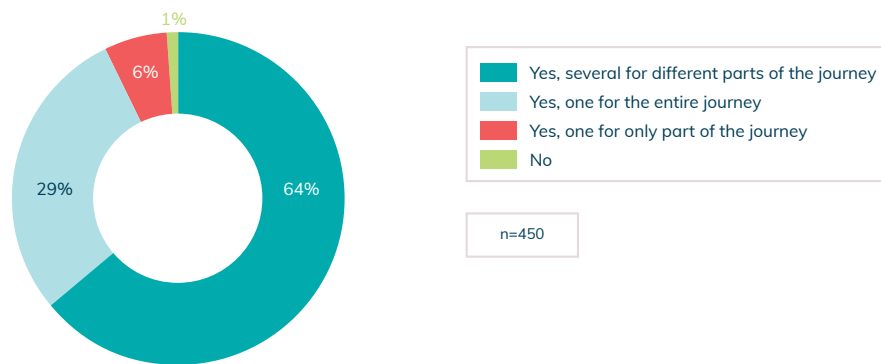


¹ Smugglers assist refugees and migrants, with whom they enter into voluntary agreements, to cross borders for financial or material gain by land, sea and air. See <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/migrant-smuggling/migrant-smuggling.html>

Majority of respondents used a smuggler at some point during their journey

The vast majority (99%) of Afghan refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi in Greece have used a smuggler at some point during their journey. Approximately one third of respondents used the same smuggler for the entire journey. Most respondents (63%) stated that they had used several different smugglers along the way. This reflects the [fragmented nature of the migration journeys](#) of many Afghans moving towards Europe.

Figure 2. Did you use a smuggler?



Smugglers take on a central decision-making role during the journey

For those respondents that affirmed that their decision to migrate was externally influenced in some way (n=421), the majority mentioned family members (spouse, parents) as the main influences for starting the journey. Smugglers were not frequently mentioned as influencing the decision to migrate by Afghans interviewed by 4Mi.

However, it seems that once the migration journey is underway, smugglers have considerable influence, with close to half of all respondents (45%) stating that their smuggler chose the migration route. This suggests that smugglers play a limited role in the decision to migrate but take on a central decision-making role during the journey.

Figure 3. Can you choose the biggest influences on your decision to migrate?

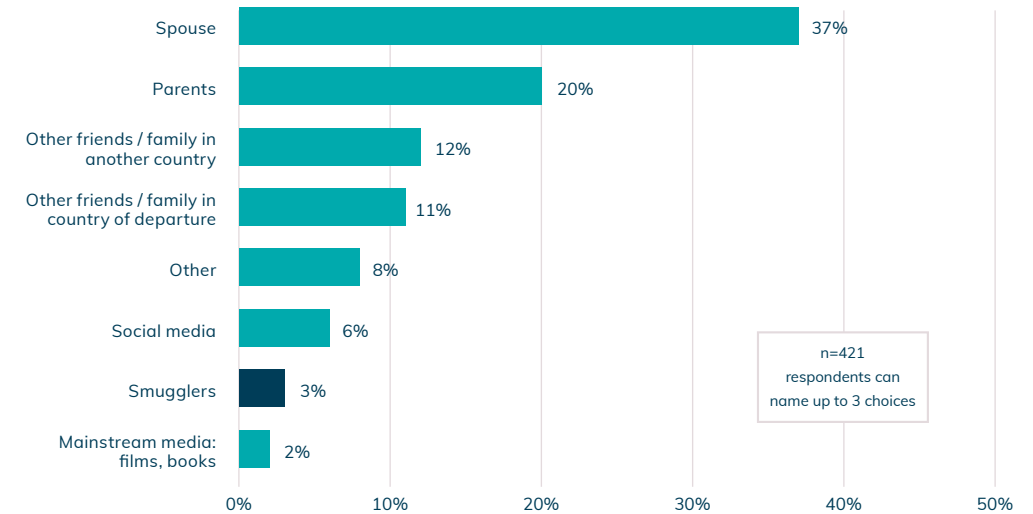
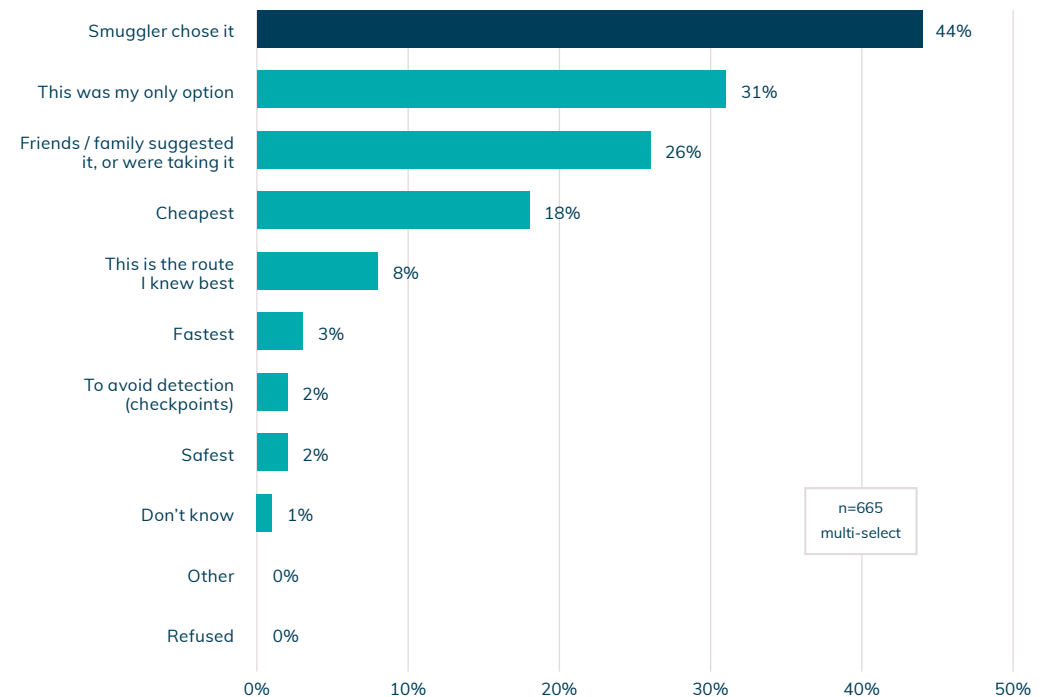


Figure 4. Why did you take this route?



Smugglers are key sources of information before and during the journey

While smugglers are not considered an influence on respondents' decision to migrate, smugglers represent a common source of information before departure. Friends and family abroad and smugglers were named by Afghan 4Mi respondents interviewed in Greece as the most common sources of information about migration journeys pre-departure. During the journey, the majority of respondents (57%) named smugglers as the main source of information. Coupled with the previous finding that smugglers take a lead on decision making once the journey is underway, this suggests that respondents are highly dependent on smugglers, particularly once en route.

Figure 5. What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your journey?

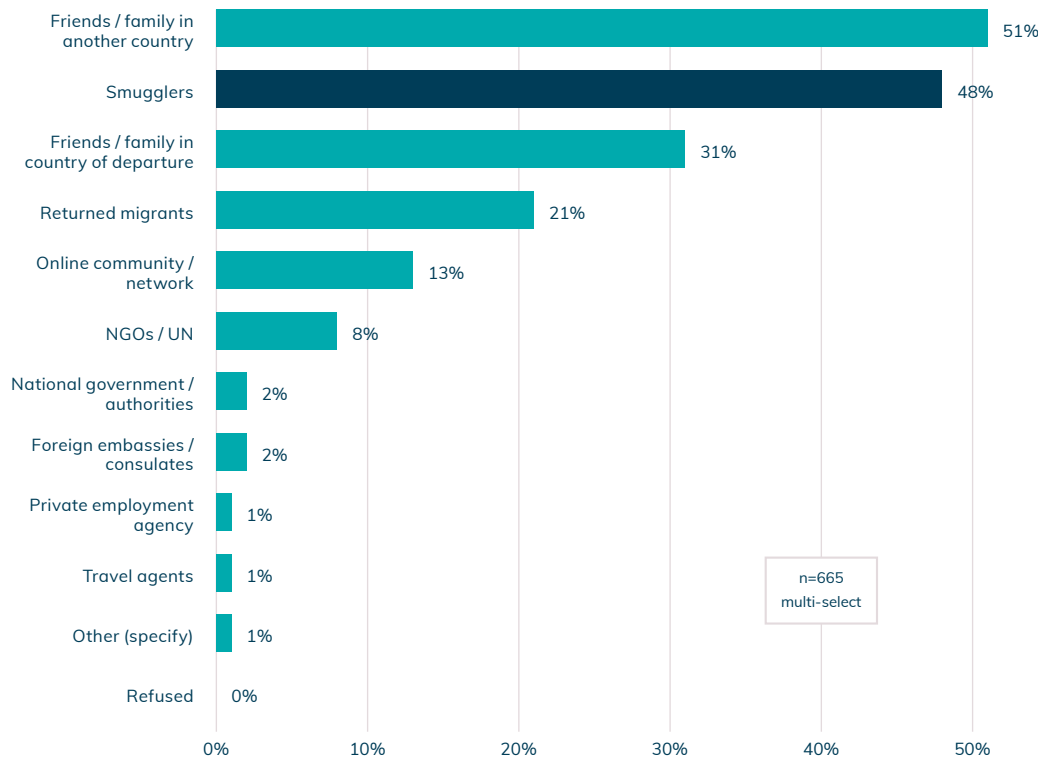
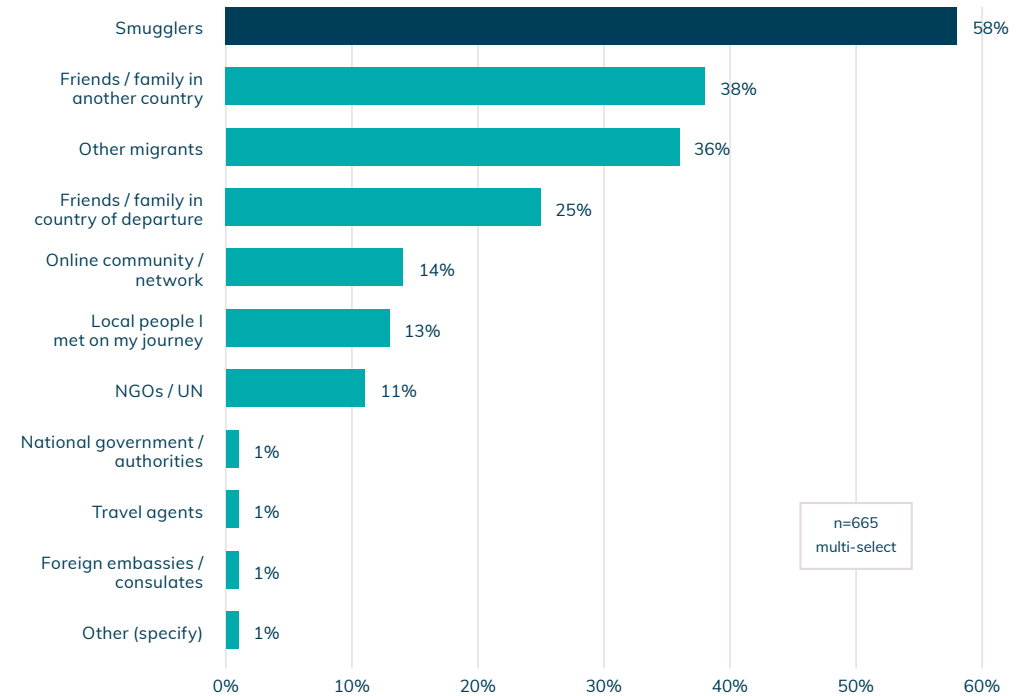


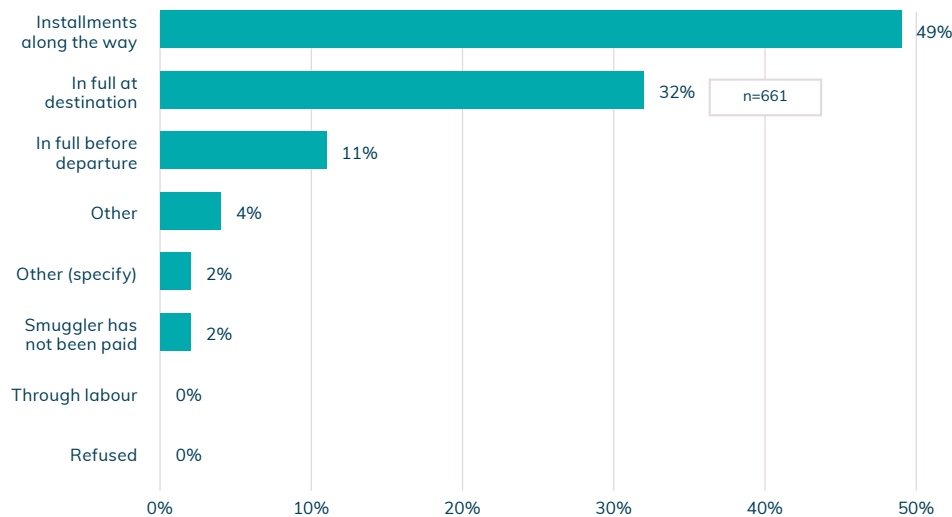
Figure 6. What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. during your journey?



Journeys most frequently paid in installments

The payment modalities for smugglers reflect the fragmented nature of Afghan's journeys towards Europe. Half of the respondents (49%) noted they paid for their journey in installments along the way. 32% of Afghans interviewed by 4Mi stated they paid their smuggler in full at the destination, which is in general considered a [safer way to interact with smugglers](#), as opposed to paying the full fee upfront.

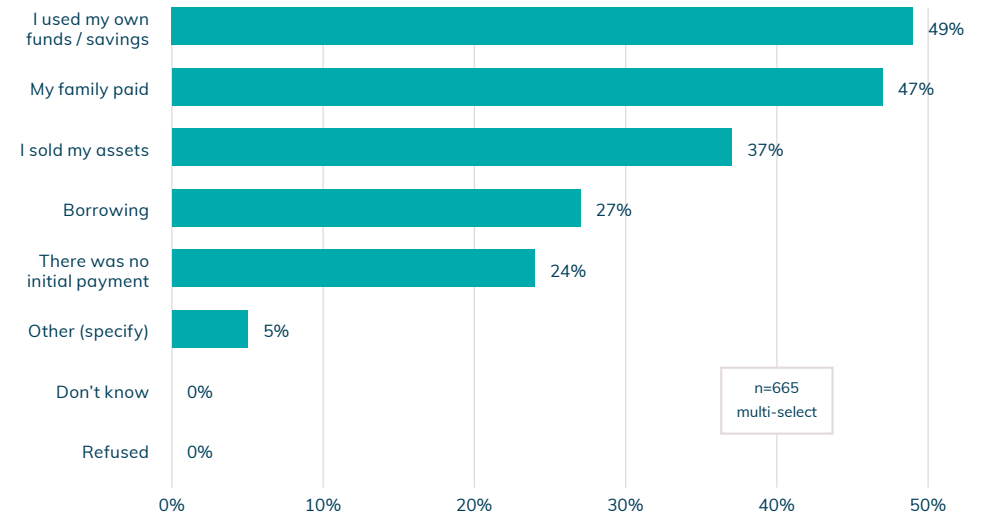
Figure 7. How did you pay the smuggler?



Migration a significant investment on individual and family level

Further zooming in on how respondents financed their journeys, 4Mi data show that the top three modes of financing journeys include I) using one's own funds and savings (49%), II) support by family members (47%), III) the selling of assets (37%). These means of financing may occur in combination with each other. Considering the costs of the journey, it is evident that migration, and the use of smugglers, is a big investment, both at individual and family level. The risk of not having enough money to pay for the next leg of the journey, and a wish or need to pay back those who have invested resources in the journey, among other factors, may render people even more reliant on smugglers and vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

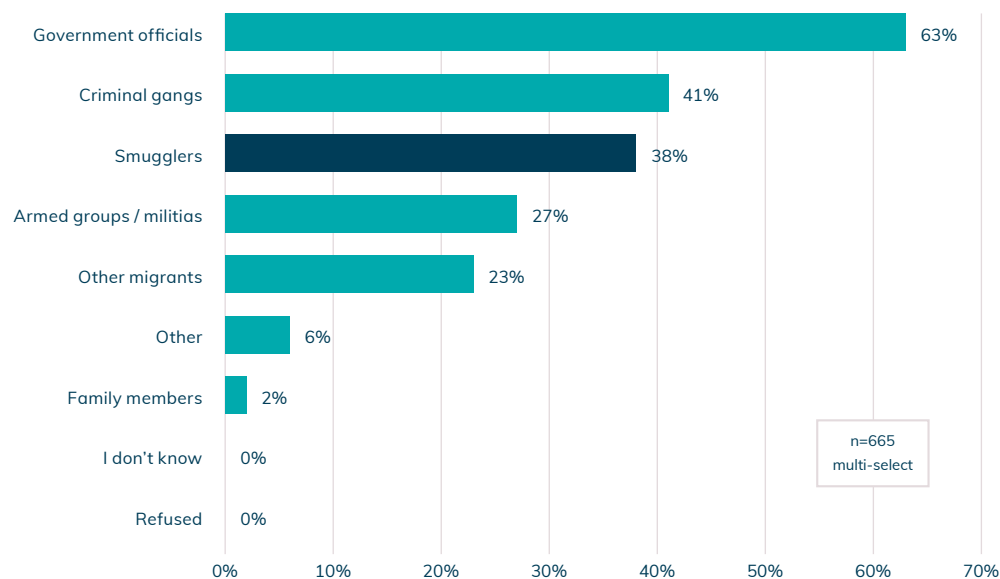
Figure 8. How did you initially finance your journey?



Smugglers as perpetrators of protection violations...

Irregular travel comes with significant risks for refugees and migrants, often exacerbated by their dependency on smugglers, especially once in transit. Overall, Afghan 4Mi respondents interviewed in Greece cite smugglers (38%) as being responsible for many of the dangerous incidents experienced along the route. Government officials were most frequently named as perpetrators (63%), followed by criminal gangs (41%).

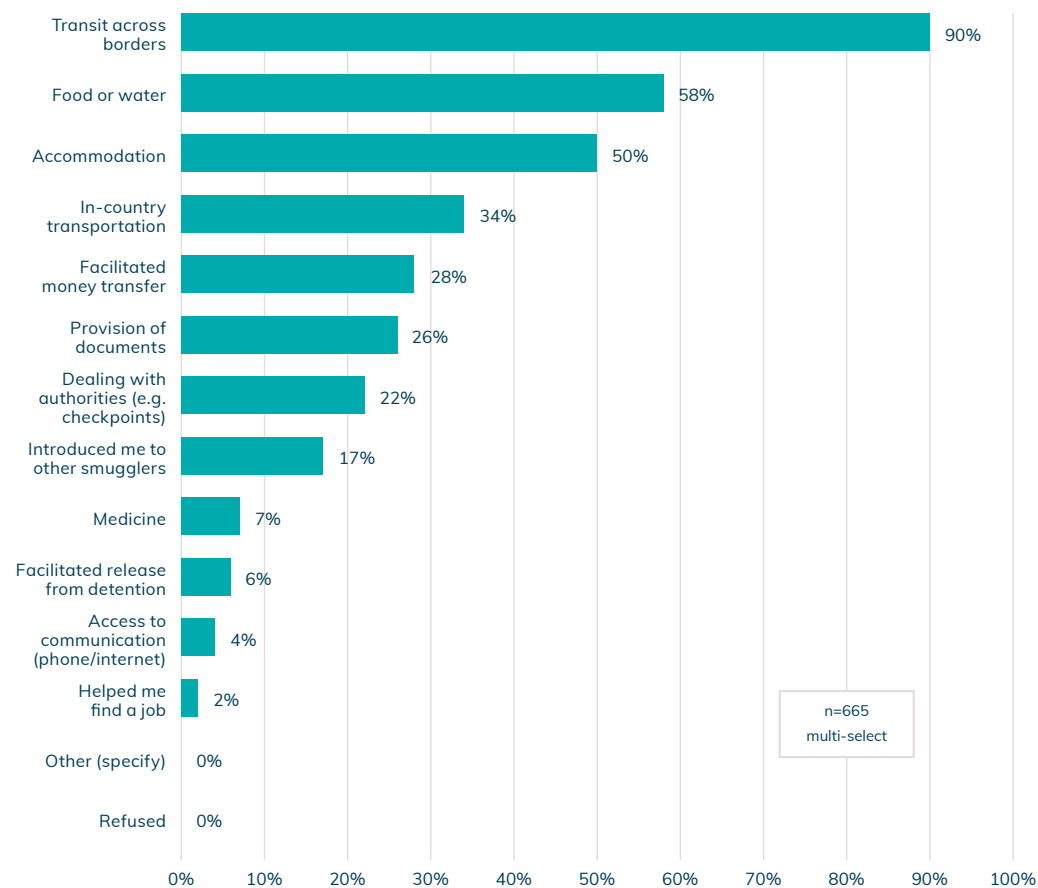
Figure 9. Who were likely to be perpetrating dangerous incidents along the route?



...or service providers...

Nonetheless, 4Mi respondents indicate that smugglers provide a wide range of essential services. Transit across borders is most frequently mentioned (cited by 90%), but this is followed by food or water (58%), and accommodation (50%). (Other services include the facilitation of money transfers, provision of documents and dealing with authorities (see Figure 10). Of course, these services are not provided for free.

Figure 10. What did the smuggler provide you with?



...or both?

To summarize, the analysis of 4Mi data indicates that smugglers play different roles, depending on the circumstances, individuals concerned and contexts, and we should be wary of over-simplistic, binary, narratives. The answers to two questions in the 4Mi surveys about perception of smuggling reflect this nuanced interaction between respondents and smugglers.

On the one hand, most Afghan 4Mi respondents interviewed in Greece agreed or strongly agreed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by their smuggler (see Figure 11). This is striking, considering that respondents cited smugglers as main sources of information before and during the journey. This finding reflects the dependency of respondents on smugglers, which comes with various risks, and indicates that a large number of refugees and migrants are ill-informed about what issues they might encounter along the route before and during travelling.

On the other hand, more than half of those surveyed (56%) agreed or strongly agreed that using a smuggler has helped them in achieving the goal of migrating to another country (see Figure 12). Bearing in mind the investments that individuals, families and communities are putting into these journeys- and the conviction of people on the move that reaching their destination will allow them to fulfil their aspirations and their life objectives- smugglers, despite the risks, are seen as providing an essential service.

Figure 11. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers”

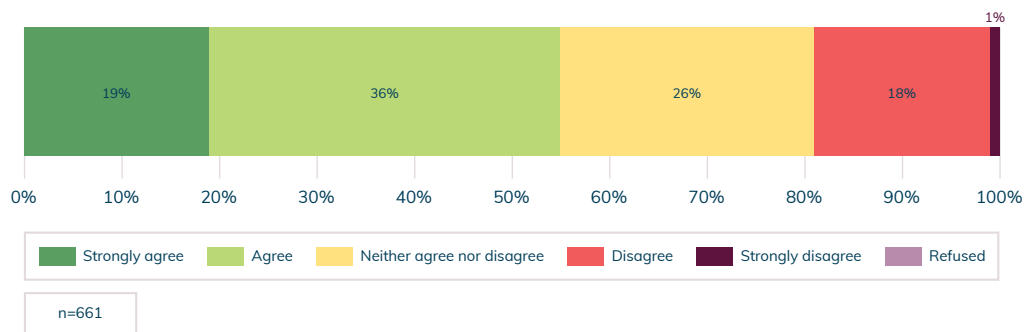
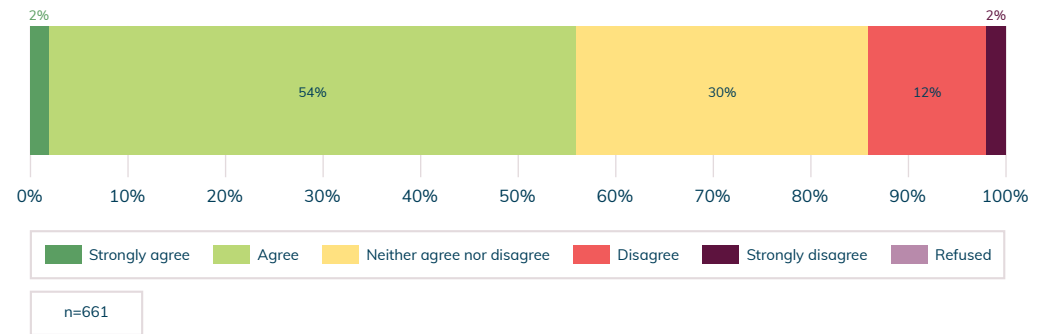


Figure 12. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: the smuggler or smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country?



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4Mi

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative](https://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi) (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. The data presented in this snapshot was collected in face-to-face interviews.

Face-to-face recruitment and data collection was suspended in all countries in March 2020, and remote methods were developed for sampling and interviewing (by phone). Since February 2021, 4Mi can be administered either by phone or face-to-face, with measures in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. 4Mi is currently being conducted in Europe, West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample are indicative, because the sample is not representative. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi