

This is the third in a series of three 4Mi snapshots looking at the conjunction between smuggling¹ and the risks and abuses faced by refugees and migrants moving through West and North Africa. It draws on 2,427 interviews conducted in Libya, Niger, Mali, and Tunisia between March and July 2021.

The first snapshot focused on smuggling and dangerous routes, and the role of smugglers as perpetrators of risks relative to other actors in these locations.² The second snapshot focused on the link between the individual characteristic of the respondents (gender, nationality, and financial status) and reports of smugglers as perpetrators of risks.³

This third snapshot focuses on the link between smuggling services and the abuses faced by the refugees and migrants, as well as the link between reliance on smugglers and dangerous journeys.

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



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 of 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.

2 See the first snapshot of the series [here](#).

3 See the second snapshots of the series [here](#).

Key findings

- **Greater reliance on smugglers corresponds to a more dangerous journey.** Overall, we see linkages between use of more types of smuggler services and propensity to have experienced a protection incident, but the cause of the vulnerability is not clear. At times, these services may be coping mechanisms for people who have experienced or are facing abuses, and at times the smuggler may be the perpetrator of abuses.
- **Respondents who paid smugglers for services which may point to a more dependent relationship with smugglers reported experiencing more types of abuse.** This was the case for services such as the provision of documents, communications and money transfer. However, as above, it is not clear to what extent using smuggler services was a response to abuses or a cause of abuses.
- **The overwhelming majority of respondents who used a smuggler and cited one of the five most dangerous places⁴ reported personally experiencing at least one abuse or violation.** This was the case for 92% of the sample, and the proportion increased with the number of services used. 98% of respondents who used 5 or more smuggler services reported experiencing at least one abuse or violation.

4 As elaborated below, this analysis is based on respondents who used a smuggler and who indicated one or more dangerous locations among the five most frequently cited: Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and the Sahara Desert (n=1,205).

Profiles and smuggler use

Between March and July 2021, a total of 2,427 surveys with refugees and migrants (32% women, 68% men) were carried out in Libya (n=908), Niger (n=477), Mali (n=471) and Tunisia (n=571). 76% of respondents (n = 1,845) said that they used a smuggler for at least part of their journey.

Respondents interviewed in Libya and Niger more often said they had used smugglers (90% and 87% respectively). Libya is considered extremely challenging to navigate without the assistance of a 'third party,'⁵ and previous MMC research has underscored the importance of smugglers for movement both in Libya and in parts of Niger.⁶ This contrasts with Tunisia, where 65% of respondents reported using a smuggler, and Mali, with only 52%. Therefore, the data on the prevalence of smugglers tells us something about how freely and independently refugees and migrants can move into and through a country.

To best understand the risks and perpetrators faced and perceived by those who use smugglers, this snapshot focuses on the five locations most frequently cited as dangerous by those who used a smuggler, where the majority of risks (87% of those cited by respondents who used smugglers) were perceived, which were Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and the Sahara Desert (n=1,205). Therefore, these results are not generalizable as the sample is structured to focus on risks and abuses.

Of these respondents, 32% were women (n=383) and 68% were male (n=822), with an average age of 28. The main countries of nationality among this group were Nigeria (29%), Sudan (7%), Guinea (5%), Eritrea (5%), Ghana (5%), Cameroon (5%), Niger (5%), Benin (4%), Sierra Leone (4%), Senegal (4%).

5 UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021) [Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#).

6 MMC (2020) [Migration and risks: smuggling networks and dynamics on the Central Mediterranean](#).

Link between greater numbers of different services used and experience of abuses

Among respondents who used a smuggler and mentioned Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and/or the Sahara Desert as dangerous, we see some links between the kind of smuggling service⁷ used and the number of types of abuses or violations experienced.⁸

On average, those respondents for whom the smuggler provided access to communication reported 4 types of abuse or violation, those for whom smugglers facilitated release from detention reported 3.9, those for whom smugglers provided documents reported 3.6 and those for whom smugglers facilitated money transfer reported 3.5.

In contrast, those smuggler services which corresponded with fewer different kinds of incidents experienced on average were provision of accommodation (2.6 types of abuse or violation), help in finding a job (2.8), transit across borders (2.8), and in-country transportation (2.8).⁹

While the abuses mentioned did not necessarily occur in relation to the stated service or at the time that service was provided, the result is interesting and not necessarily intuitive, given that provision of documents, communications and money transfer do not in themselves seem as risky as crossing a border. They could, however, be indicative of a more dependent and potentially more exploitative relationship between the smuggler and respondent. The slightly higher average for facilitating release from detention is less surprising given that the experience of being detained is inherent to the service itself.

7 Most respondents (84%) used multiple services, with an average of 3 services cited per person. Smuggling services in order of usage: transit across borders (cited by 65% of respondents), in-country transportation (48%), accommodation (40%), dealing with authorities (33%), food or water (26%), provision of documents (18%), introduction to other smugglers (15%), facilitated money transfer (13%), facilitated release from detention (11%), help in finding job (11%), access to communication (9%), medicine (7%), other (1%).

8 This is in response to a question which asks respondents to indicate which types of abuse or violation they have experienced, without indicating how many times they have experienced each kind. Thus, it does not speak to the total number of abuses a person has experienced.

9 Respondents could select both multiple services and multiple abuses/violations in answering these questions.

Table 1. Experience of specific abuses/violations, according to the type of smuggling service used

	Transit across borders	Accommodation	In-country transportation	Provision of documents	Access to communication (phone / internet)	Facilitated money transfer	Facilitated release from detention
Witnessed death	27%	25%	27%	35%	47%	40%	43%
Physical violence	57%	55%	57%	83%	71%	70%	65%
Sexual violence	15%	24%	14%	24%	39%	35%	50%
Robbery	48%	44%	46%	70%	68%	70%	60%
Detention	32%	27%	33%	30%	50%	48%	80%

When compared to other smuggling services used, higher proportions of respondents who cited money transfer, access to communications or release from detention reported experiencing physical violence, sexual violence, robbery, and detention, as well as witnessing deaths. This also holds true for those who obtained documents from smugglers in relation to two abuses: physical violence and robbery.

Greater dependence on smugglers corresponds to a more dangerous journey

In general people who used a greater number of different smuggling services more frequently reported personally experiencing at least one abuse or violation. Whereas 92% of respondents who used one service (n=195) reported having personally been the victim of at least one abuse or violation, this was the case for 98% of those who had used five or more services (n=190).¹⁰

This correlation between greater numbers of different services used and experience of abuses also seems to align with the analysis above, which showed that respondents

10 Looking at the entire sample of respondents who used a smuggler (n=1,845), not only those who cited Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and/or the Sahara Desert as dangerous, this tendency is even more pronounced. For instance, 72% of those who used one service experienced at least one abuse or violation vs. 90% of those who used 5 services.

indicating some of the less utilized services (ie facilitation of communication (cited by 9% of respondents), release from detention (11%) money transfer (13%) or documents (18%)), reported experiencing more types of incidents on average, as well as more frequently reporting certain types of incident.

This could suggest that as well as the more commonly used services such as transit across borders (cited by 65% respondents), refugees and migrants require additional services to respond to particular challenges or vulnerabilities they face. For instance, someone who has been robbed may need a smuggler's assistance in facilitating a money transfer, communication, or documents to replace essential items such as cash, a phone or travel papers that were stolen.

However, the opposite could also be true, and smuggler use itself could be the cause of vulnerability. For instance, in Libya smugglers have been known to hand over refugees and migrants to detention officials,¹¹ thereby creating a need for release to be facilitated. Overall, we see linkages between more use of smuggling services and propensity to experience a protection incident, but the cause of the vulnerability is not clear. At times, these services may be coping mechanisms for people who have experienced or are facing abuses, and at times the smuggler may be the perpetrator of abuses. And as is the case for financial status, other factors, such as journey length, could play a role.¹² What is apparent, however, is that greater dependence on smugglers corresponds to a more dangerous journey.

11 Amnesty International (2015) '[Libya is Full of Cruelty: Stories of abduction, sexual violence and abuse from migrants and refugees.](#)

12 For more discussion of smuggler use and the experience of protection incidents, see the MMC's [A Sharper Lens on Vulnerability \(West Africa\) – A statistical analysis of the determinants of vulnerability to protection incidents among refugees and migrants in West Africa.](#) While not conducting analysis at the level of individual smuggler services, this study finds that respondents who use smugglers are more likely to experience all types of protection incidents examined, except kidnapping, while controlling for confounding variable such as journey length. However, it does not follow that the smuggler is necessarily responsible for these incidents.



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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