

Corruption and the role of state officials in human smuggling

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “[c]orruption, including bribery of customs, visa and border control officials plays a key role in migrant smuggling.”¹ This snapshot seeks to better understand the role of state or public officials (police, military, accommodation or detention centre staff or visa, passport or other immigration officials),² within the process of smuggling, by examining the types of officials, their countries and their activities. It draws upon interviews conducted with smugglers³ and with refugees and migrants in Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Niger and Tunisia.

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](#).



Key findings

- **58% of all refugees and migrants surveyed reported contact with state officials; 82% of these refugees and migrants paid a "gift" to state officials they had contact with** during their journey. 59% of these officials were police at a border.
- **More than half of the smugglers surveyed cited that they and/or their group have contact with state officials** to facilitate human smuggling.
- In specifying which state officials, the majority of smugglers surveyed reported contact with **police (68%)** and **border control (68%)**.
- Activities differed by country, but **a majority of smugglers reported state officials' involvement in releasing refugees and migrants from detention, and guiding refugees and migrant across borders**, in several countries.
- **61% of smugglers mentioned directly paying public officials** involved in smuggling.

Profiles

This snapshot draws upon 281 surveys conducted with smugglers⁴ from June–September 2021 in Libya (n=80), Mali (n=59) and Niger (n=59) and from July–September 2021 in Tunisia (n=47) and Burkina Faso (n=36). The sample is composed of 89% men and 11% women. Respondents represent 22 nationalities, mainly Malians (21%), Nigeriens (15%), Burkinabé (10%), Nigerians (9%) and Ivorians (8%). Smugglers surveyed said they were operating in 23 different countries, mainly Niger (42%), Libya (35%), Mali (27%), Burkina Faso (23%), Algeria (18%) and Tunisia (16%).

To complement the data from smugglers, this snapshot also draws upon 6,641 surveys collected with refugees and migrants interviewed in Tunisia (28%), Libya (25%), Mali (18%), Niger (17%) and Burkina Faso (12%) since February 2021. The sample is composed of 65% men and 35% women. Most men (60%) and women (60%) were aged between 26 and 35 years. Respondents represent 51 different nationalities, including Nigerians (15%), Ivorians (9%), Guineans (8%), Sudanese (6%) and Malians (6%).

1 UNODC (2021) [Migrant Smuggling FAQs](#).

2 Throughout the snapshot, state officials and public officials are used interchangeably.

3 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

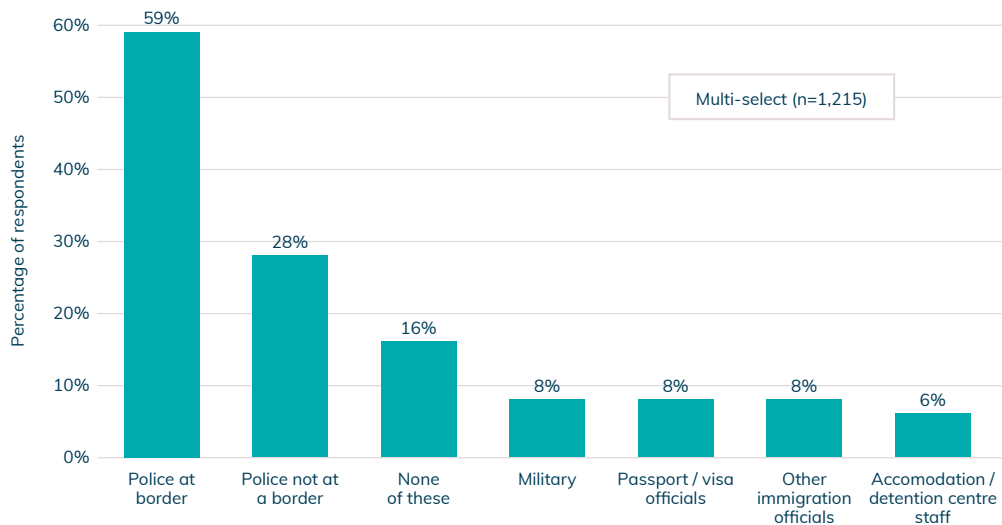
4 Sampling was conducted through referrals and existing networks. Participants more often played roles within smuggling networks that included direct contact with smugglers and migrants, than more distant organisational or management activities.

Overall, the majority of refugees and migrants who had contact with state officials paid some form of compensation

Before focusing specifically on the interaction of public officials with refugees and migrants who used a smuggler, or with smugglers, it is important to note the general level of interaction between refugees and migrants and state officials, and the level of corruption: 58% of all refugee and migrant respondents reported contact with state officials. 35% said they had no contact (6% didn't know and 1% preferred not to say). 42% said they had contact with police at a border, followed by police not at a border (21%), immigration officials (10%), passport/visa officials (9%), military (8%), accommodation/detention center staff (7%) and 6% of respondents did not know the type of government officials with whom they were in contact.

82% of those who had contact with state officials reported offering a 'gift', money or some kind of favor in return for a service, either directly or indirectly.⁵ Again, this was more frequently police, especially those at a border (Figure 1), thus reflecting the officials with which refugees and migrants interacted.

Figure 1. Have you had to give officials a gift, money or some kind of favor in return for a service? [Respondents who had contact with a public official]⁶



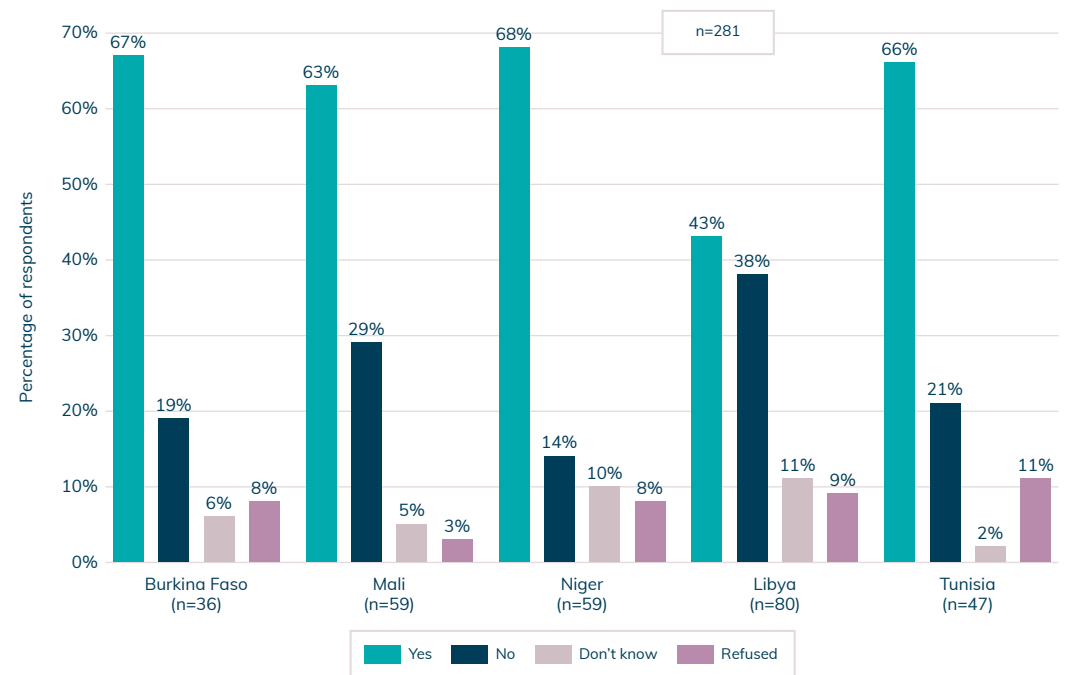
⁵ This is in addition to any official fee, and may have been paid directly, or through someone else.

⁶ These data are based on a question introduced later to the survey and targets respondents who had contact with a state official during their journey; hence, the sample size is smaller.

More than half of smugglers surveyed cited having contact with state officials

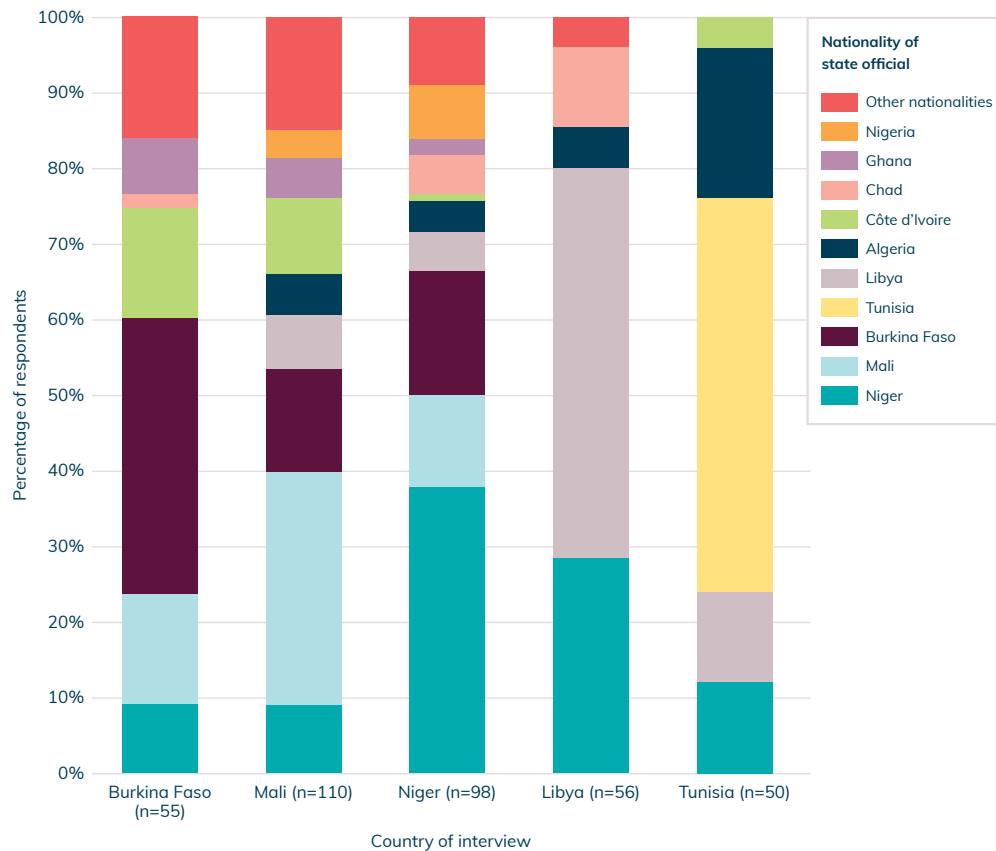
60% of the 281 smugglers surveyed confirmed that they or their group have contact with state officials to facilitate migrant smuggling. 26% expressed that they or their group don't have contact with state officials, while 8% refused to answer and 7% cited that they do not know. Analysis across the five survey countries (see Figure 2) shows that most smugglers surveyed in Niger (40/59) had contact with state officials. Similar results were found in Burkina Faso (24/36), Tunisia (31/47), and Mali (37/59). In contrast, less than half of smugglers surveyed in Libya (34/80) said they had contact with state officials, and over a third said that they do not have any contact (30/80).

Figure 2. Do you or your group have any contact with state officials to facilitate migrant smuggling? [By country of survey]



Smugglers interviewed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger report interacting with state officials of a wide range of nationalities (Figure 3), suggesting that they have widespread, transnational networks. In contrast, smugglers surveyed in Tunisia mainly interact with Tunisian and Algerian officials, and smugglers surveyed in Libya primarily interact with state officials from Libya and Niger. Here, the nationality of officials with whom smugglers have contact reflects the country of survey and its immediate neighbors.

Figure 3. From which countries?⁷ [State officials in contact with smugglers to facilitate migrant smuggling, by country of survey] (multi-select)



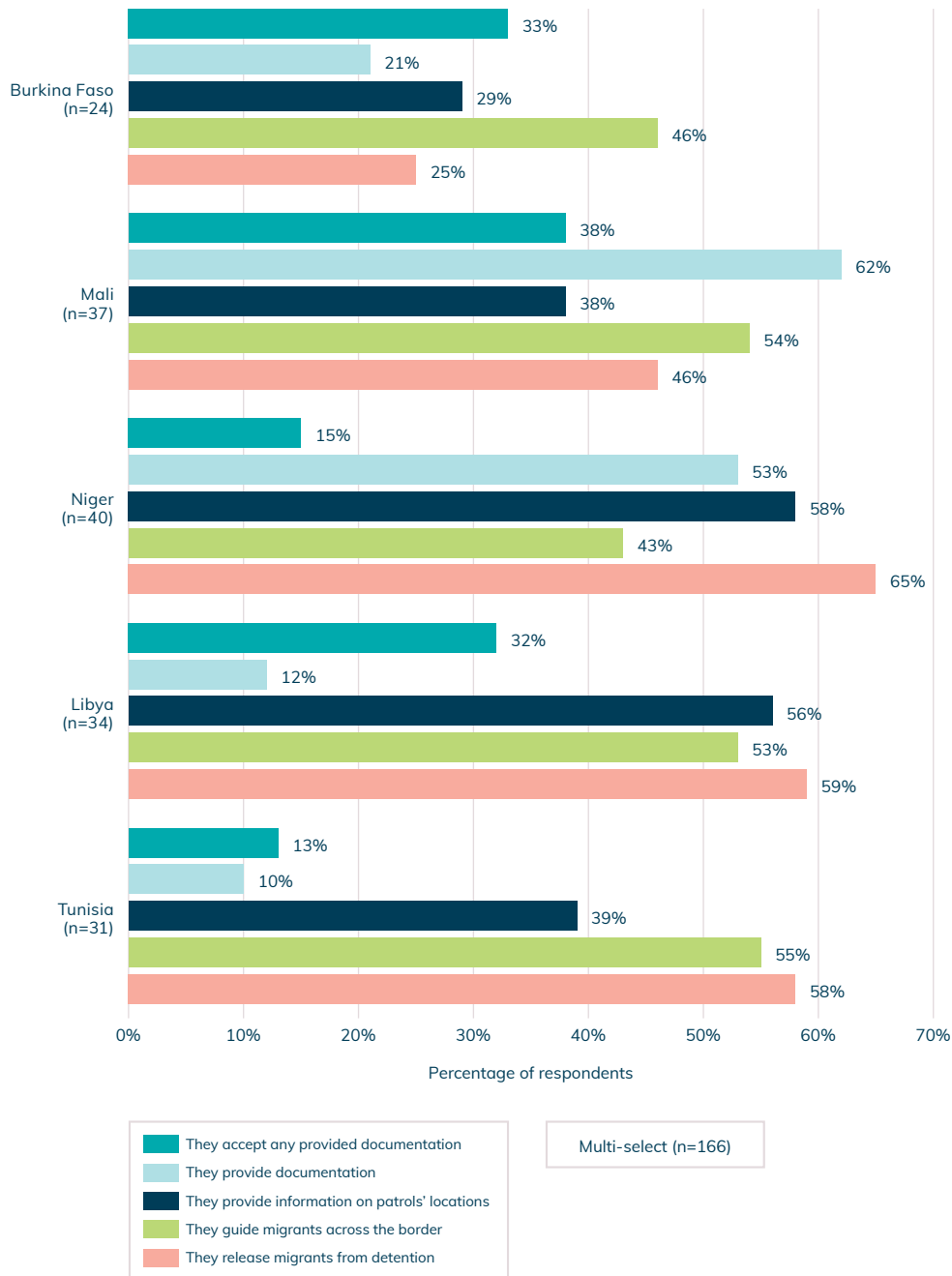
⁷ Other nationalities that are mentioned by less than 5% of respondents include: Togo, Benin, Mauritania and Sudan.

Smugglers' contact is more often with police and border control officials

Of those smugglers who had contact with state officials (n=166), the most commonly reported types of officials were police (68%) and border control (68%), followed by detention centre staff (31%), health or social workers (23%), military/armed forces (22%), coast guards (21%), passport agency/visa officials (16%) and judiciary/lawyers (11%).

State officials were reported to be involved in multiple activities (see Figure 4), although these differ slightly from country to country. A majority of smugglers in Libya reported contact with state officials to release refugees and migrants from detention, find out about patrols, and guide migrants' border crossings; in Tunisia a majority mentioned release from detention and guiding migrants across border(s); in Niger the majority also reported release from detention, information on patrols, and provision of documentation; in Mali the main activities were provision of documentation and information on patrols; and finally in Burkina Faso there was no majority, but the most common activity was guiding refugees and migrants across borders. With detention centres and border crossings being among the main spaces in which state officials manage migration, the collusion with smugglers in these domains highlights how smuggling operations have evolved alongside migration management regimes.

Figure 4. How are public/state officials involved in migrant smuggling? [By country of interview]



Most surveyed smugglers report directly paying the state officials with whom they work

Payments to officials occur through multiple channels. While 61% of smugglers who had contact with state officials said that they directly pay the state officials with whom they work, and 30% have someone in their smuggler group pay such officials, 29% also reported that payments to officials are paid directly by refugees or migrants (although it must be noted that the results are likely limited by the composition of the sample of smugglers surveyed). When asked about the form of payment (whether by the smuggler directly, by refugees or migrants, or by someone else), 81% of smugglers cited money as the most common payment form, followed by services (16%), transactional sex (8%) and in-kind (5%). The finding on transactional sex is particularly concerning, for it can be assumed that respondents are under-reporting this violation, given that many victims and witnesses may not feel comfortable divulging such sensitive information, and yet nearly a tenth of respondents identify it as a form of payment.

Bribery is also used by smugglers to secure their release from detention or avoid detention after being arrested. 26 of the 41 smugglers who affirmed that they had been arrested at least once stated that they paid a bribe to be released from detention. An additional 14 of the 41 respondents paid a bribe upon being apprehended, to avoid detention.

Smugglers' perspectives on authorities' efforts to counter human smuggling differ according to country

32% of all interviewed smugglers perceived that measures to counter smuggling are strictly implemented; 31% thought measures are moderately implemented. By contrast, 23% perceived that authorities do not implement any measures to counter smuggling and 5% believed that authorities encourage smuggling.

Perceptions of strict implementation were most common in Tunisia (64%, 28/44), Libya (44%, 43/97), and Algeria (44%, 23/52). In contrast, smugglers interviewed in Niger and Burkina Faso more often cited that measures are moderately implemented (39% in each country, 46/119 and 25/64, respectively). A perception that no measures are really implemented was most common among smugglers who operated in Côte d'Ivoire (42%, 13/31), Guinea (42%, 10/24), Senegal (52%, 12/23), Nigeria (43%, 10/23), Chad (30%, 7/23) and Ghana (41%, 7/17). These differences reflect the relatively greater ease of movement between West African countries versus the more tightly controlled borders between West African and North African countries, and between North African countries.



This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants: www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html

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