

How to migrate north: factors behind Central American refugees' and migrants' decisions in Mexico

People on the move from Central America face several decisions before and during their journey north: which migration route to take? What means of transportation to use? How to avoid dangers during the journey?

Dozens of irregular border crossings can be used to enter Mexico from Guatemala. Once in Mexico, there are three main land routes to reach the northern border with the US: the Gulf Route, the Pacific Route and the route through the center of Mexico.¹ Data presented in this snapshot covers the journey along the Pacific route in Mexico, between Tapachula and Tijuana, and explores the reasons behind refugees and migrants' decisions on their migration route. 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 Mexico.

Key findings

- **Refugees and migrants interviewed on the Pacific Route** are mainly choosing their migration route **for reasons of safety**.
- Respondents **planned their migration routes** based on the **recommendations of relatives or friends who had already migrated**.
- **Smugglers** had a **limited role in migration decision-making** amongst respondents in Mexico.
- **Commercial express bus** was the mean of transportation **most frequently used** by respondents to travel north.

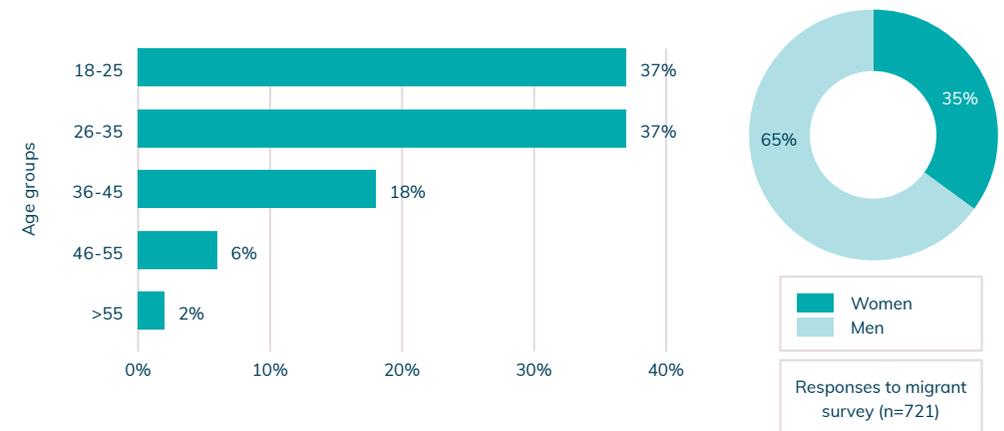
Profiles

The analysis is based on 721 surveys conducted in Mexico between February and August 2021, mainly by face-to-face interview (96%) and partially by phone (4%). 72% of the surveys were carried out in Tapachula, a city in southern Mexico near the border with Guatemala, and 27% in Tijuana, located at the border between Mexico and the US.² Direct observation by 4Mi enumerators and interviews with local actors also fed into this analysis.

This snapshot covers respondents who started their migration journey from Honduras (64% of the sample), El Salvador (23%), Guatemala (10%) and Nicaragua (3%), focusing on Mexico as one of the longest and most challenging parts of the route

65% of respondents were men and 35% were women. 74% of respondents were in the 18 to 35 age range and the average age of the sample was 30 years (see Figure 1 on the following page).

Figure 1. Sex and age ranges



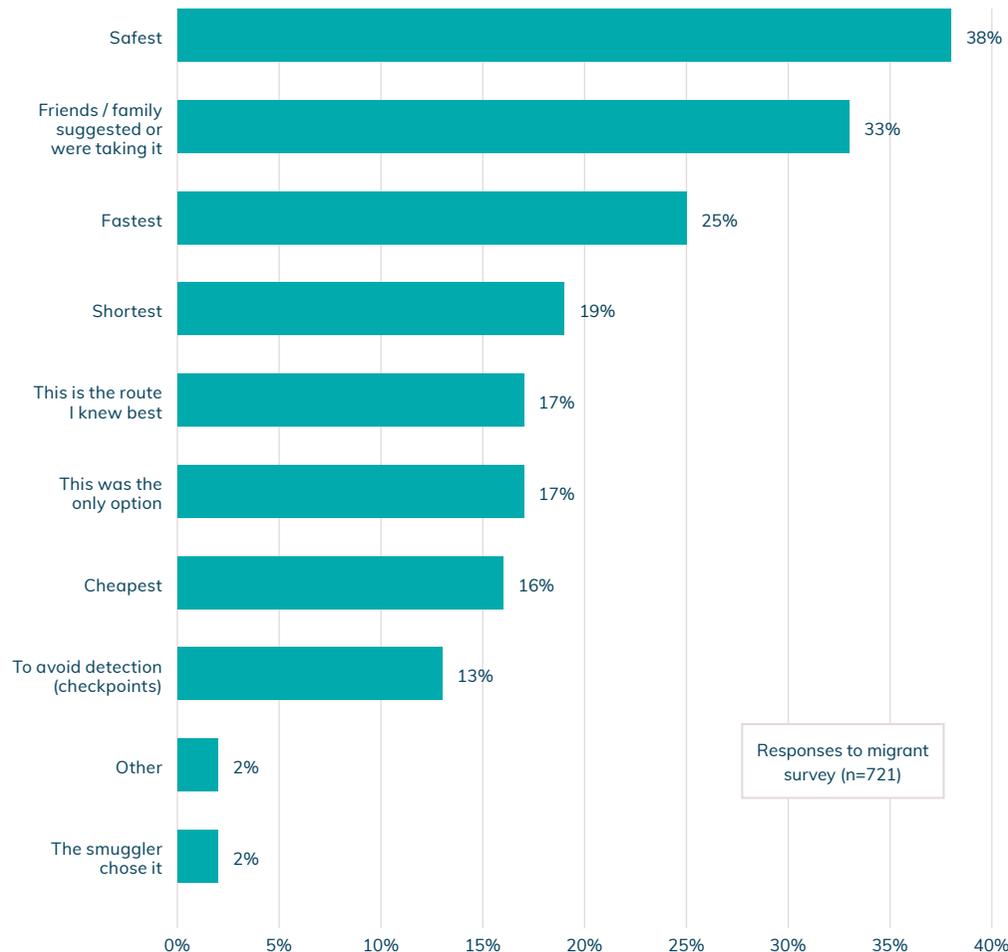
1 IOM (2017): [Mixed migration routes: Central America incl. Mexico](#)

2 4Mi monitors in Mexico are currently located in Tapachula and Tijuana. Data collection however began later in Tijuana (end of April 2021), meaning that data from this location is more limited.

Safety is the main priority among respondents

When asked why they chose a specific migration route, the main reason indicated by respondents (38%) was safety. Most respondents (49%) consider several factors: 33% of respondents mentioned having chosen their route because someone they trusted suggested it or was taking it. Speed and length were mentioned less frequently, by 25% and 19% of respondents, respectively. Only 16% of respondents reported having taken their migration route because it was the cheapest option (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Why did you take this route?



Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

Migrating through Central America and Mexico is dangerous: 83% of the respondents interviewed in Mexico between August and November 2021 (388/467) experienced at least one type of protection incident during their journey. 56% of them were victims of robbery, 51% of bribery/extortion and 23% of physical violence. According to 4Mi enumerators, respondents plan their routes to cross areas rumored to be safer, relying on recommendations found on social media or shared by friends and relatives who have already migrated.

Time spent traveling is another relevant factor. According to 4Mi enumerators, some respondents choose the fastest and shortest route across Mexico, depending on the regions they wanted to reach within the US.³ No statistically significant differences were found regarding the most relevant factors in choices relating to the migration route based on the respondents' nationality.⁴

Most respondents decided themselves which migration route to take

Contrary to what is often thought, data points to a limited role for smugglers in refugees' and migrants' decision-making on their migration route: only 2% of respondents mentioned that smugglers chose the route (although this proportion could be higher as respondents are often reluctant to talk about their interactions with smugglers). In some cases, however, the migration route is planned by the smuggler in its entirety. Smuggling activities 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.⁵

3 See also Casillas (2008): [The routes of Central Americans through Mexico: characterization, principal agents y complexities](#)

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

5 Victoria A. Greenfield et al (2019): [Human Smuggling from Central America to the United States](#)

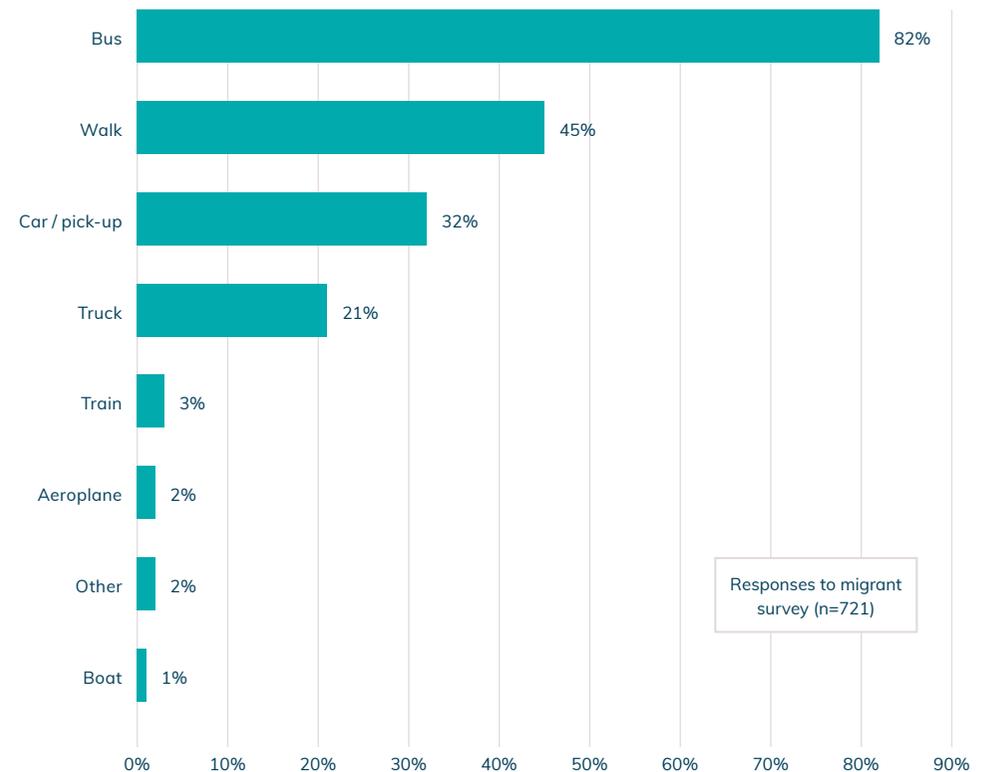
According to local actors interviewed in Tapachula, the use of smugglers has changed since the first “migrant caravans” took place in 2018. People on the move from Central America seem to be relying less on smugglers since then. With the caravans, prospective refugees and migrants realized that they could reach the northern border of Mexico on their own and with information they found through other sources, instead of paying a smuggler. This implies that people on the move can now be freer to make independent choices on their migration route rather than depending on smugglers’ decisions.

Since March 2020, the U.S government has been expelling people on the move reaching its southern border back into Mexican territory under a provision of US health law, known as Title 42. However, the policy is not applied evenly across the border, with disparities in implementation between the different official border entry points, depending on profiles of people on the move. US Customs and Border Protection data from 2020 and 2021⁶ indicates that smugglers have taken advantage of these disparities and have been directing people on the move to cross the border between Mexico and the US where they are least likely to be sent back, depending on their nationality and demographic profile.⁷

Taking a bus and walking are the most frequent means of transportation

Respondents reported an average of two types of transportation used along their migration route. The means most frequently used were bus (for 82% of all respondents), walking (45%), private vehicles (32%) and trucks (21%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Which means of transportation have you used during your journey?



Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

6 CBP (2021): [Nationwide Encounters](#)

7 Washington Post (2021): [As migrants arrive from more nations, their paths to U.S. border diverge, new data show](#)

A strategy to minimize exposure to danger is to reach the US–Mexico border by bus: the journey is considered safer and faster, compared to traveling on foot or hitchhiking.⁸ People on the move from Central America often use commercial express buses, which transport them from towns near Mexico's southern border to Mexico City, and from there to the US-Mexico border. According to additional information shared by 4Mi enumerators, the journey across Mexico can take as little as three days if there are no delays. Transportation, just like the route to be taken, is usually planned based on recommendations by relatives or friends who already migrated through Mexico, or directly by smugglers. According to a local actor in Tapachula, people on the move without a permit to stay in Mexico must stop to get off the bus before each police checkpoint and walk to meet the bus later, usually with the complicity of the bus driver, or choose an alternative itinerary to travel through secondary roads. However, according to key informants, local authorities recently tightened controls on the main routes around Tapachula, which has made it more difficult for people with irregular status to travel across Mexico by bus.

Refugees and migrants with fewer economic resources do not have the possibility to cover the entire route by bus; they must walk for at least parts of the journey, even if they know that it means more exposure to risks. According to 4Mi enumerators and local actors, another strategy used by refugees and migrants with few or no economic resources is to hitchhike: this explains why more than half of respondents also mentioned having used cars or trucks during their journey.

There are statistically significant⁹ differences between the means of transportation used depending on the respondents' country of departure. Those who started their journey from El Salvador used the bus more often (92%) than those who departed from Honduras (77%). Respondents who started their journey in Honduras reported more often having walked along the route (49%).

This difference can be explained at least partially by the difference in economic resources: 73% of respondents from El Salvador reported that they were making money in the last 12 months before they left their country of departure, whereas this was the case for only 54% of respondents from Honduras. An additional relevant factor is that 4Mi enumerators interviewed several people on the move from Honduras who were trying to reach Mexico

and the US by walking in big groups (the so-called "migrant caravans").¹⁰ This migration dynamic gained traction among prospective refugees and migrants who believe that migrating in a caravan, through sheer numbers, offers protection and reduces exposure to the crimes and abuse often encountered along the route. Caravans have also been considered as an alternative to using the smuggling services for refugees and migrants with few or no economic resources.¹¹ Such caravans however started facing a harsher response since the end of 2020 and: this migration dynamic has therefore become less frequent since then.¹²

10 RESCUE (2021): [Ongoing migrant caravans are symptoms of the emergencies in northern Central America, warns IRC](#)

11 IOM (2018): [Migrant Caravans](#); Forced Migration Review (2020): [Migrant 'caravans' in Mexico and the fight against smuggling](#)

12 Reuters (2021): [Migrant caravan in Mexico presses on, meets growing resistance](#)



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

8 NPR (2019): [Coyotes' Boomtown: Picking Up The Migrant Trail On The Way To The U.S.-Mexico Border](#)

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