

Financing of human smuggling in West and North Africa

This snapshot focuses on the economics and financing of smuggling¹ of people on the move in West and North Africa. It draws on 5,171 surveys with refugees and migrants conducted in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Libya and Tunisia from February to October 2021. It is also based on 356 surveys among smugglers conducted in the same countries during the same period. It analyses fees for smuggler services and payment modalities, providing valuable insights on the overall dynamics of smugglers' economic activities.

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](#).



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.

Key findings

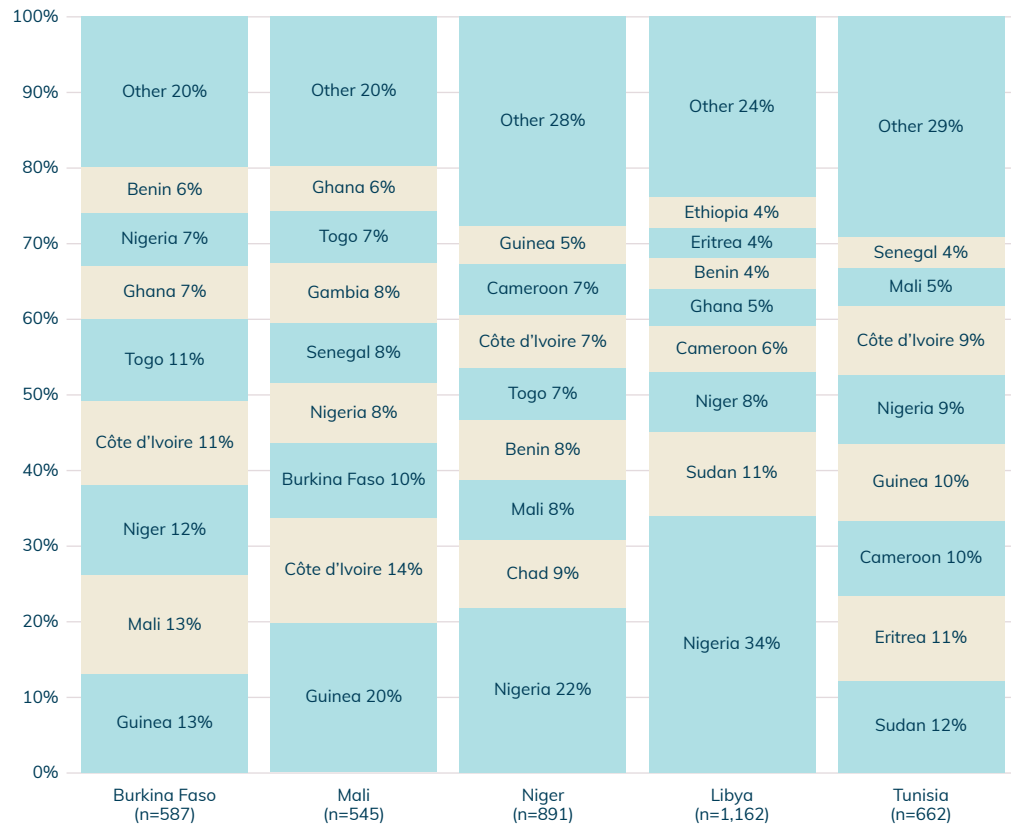
- Smuggling makes up 60% of the journey costs for the surveyed refugees and migrants who use smugglers. This share is highest among respondents in Libya.
- The majority of smugglers surveyed increased their fees in the last 6 months of 2021 (57%), most often because of higher demand, higher costs and increased risks due to government controls.
- The vast majority of surveyed refugees and migrants (95%) pay their smugglers in cash and the majority (59%) pay the full fees before departure.
- Data suggest that detention – more specifically, paying for release from detention – can make up a large proportion of overall journey costs.
- Based on our primary data and estimates on the volume of irregular migration from East and West Africa to Libya and Tunisia, we estimate the value of the smuggling business along these two migration routes towards Libya and Tunisia at a total of USD 60.5 million for 2021.

Profiles

This snapshot draws on 3,847 surveys conducted with refugees and migrants who used a smuggler, surveyed in Burkina Faso (587), Mali (891), Niger (545), Libya (1,162) and Tunisia (662) from February to October 2021.² The majority were men (67%), and most respondents were aged between 26 and 35 (60%).

2 The sample includes 16 nationalities with more than 100 respondents, and another 27 nationalities with smaller numbers of interviewees. 'West and Central Africans' includes the following countries of nationality in this snapshot: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo. 'East Africans' includes Burundi, DRC, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda.

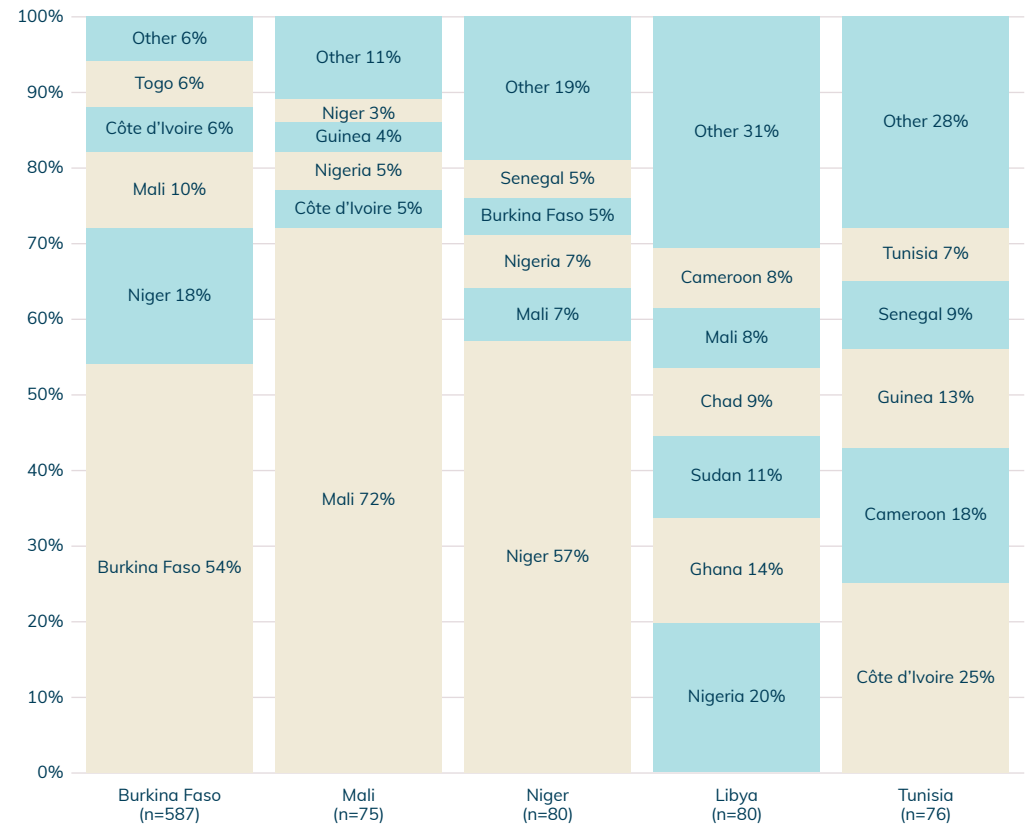
Figure 1. Main nationalities of respondents using a smuggler, by country of interview



It is also based on 356 surveys with smugglers conducted in the same countries during the same period. 89% of smugglers surveyed were men. The majority, including those interviewed in North Africa, were of West and Central African nationalities: Mali (21%), Niger (16%), Burkina Faso (10%), Côte d'Ivoire (8%), Nigeria (7%) and Cameroon (6%). See Figure 2 for a breakdown of nationality by country of interview.

Financial data includes data reported in USD, CFA or EUR, and converted to USD using formal exchange rates. Respondents who had to exchange currencies are unlikely to have used the formal rate, but reliable data on those rates was not available for use here.

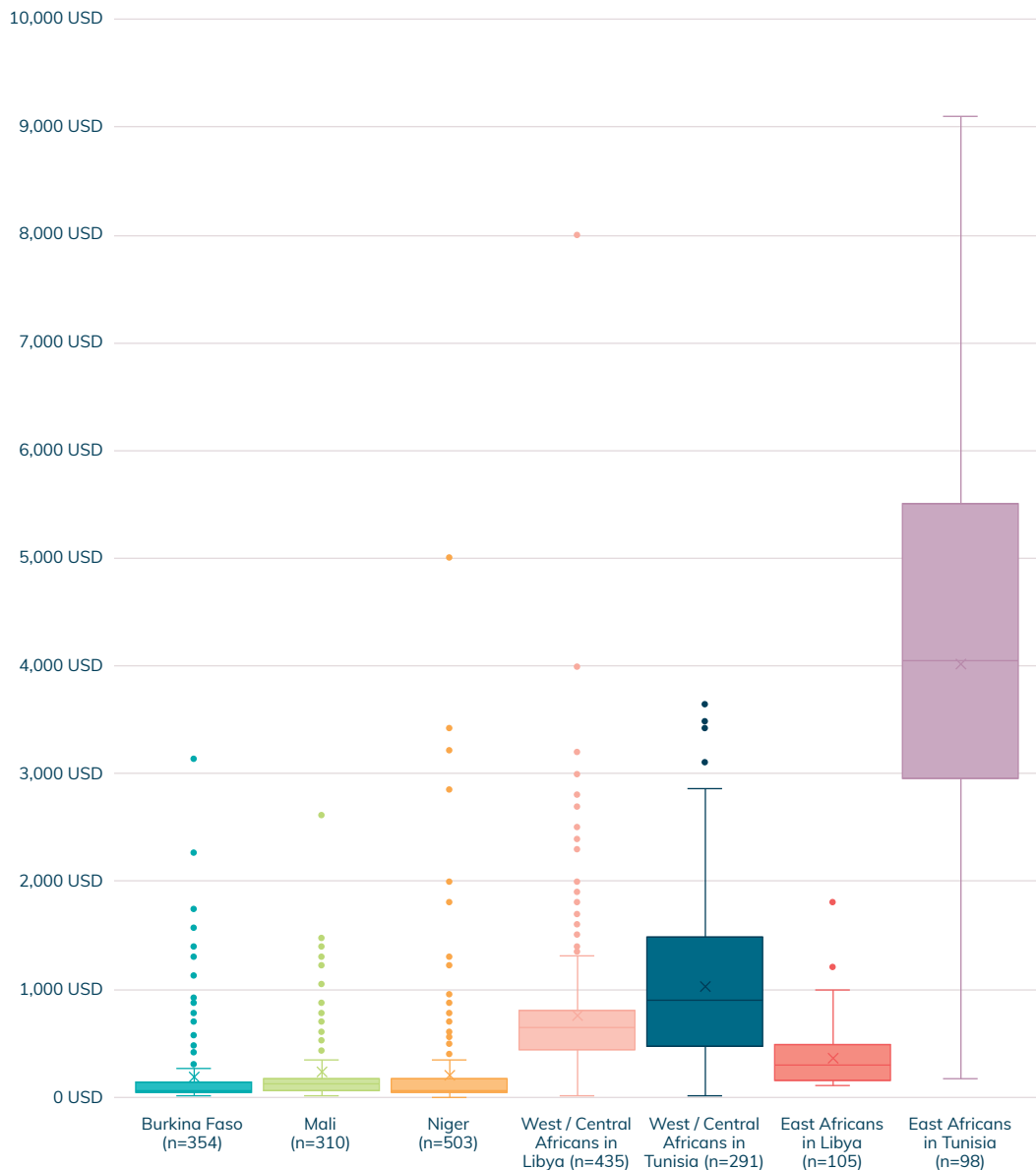
Figure 2. Main nationalities of surveyed smugglers, by country of interview



Note that the sample size differs per question, as many questions are contingent on others: sample size (n) is indicated throughout the snapshot.

Smuggling fees

Figure 3. Smuggling fees paid so far, by country of interview

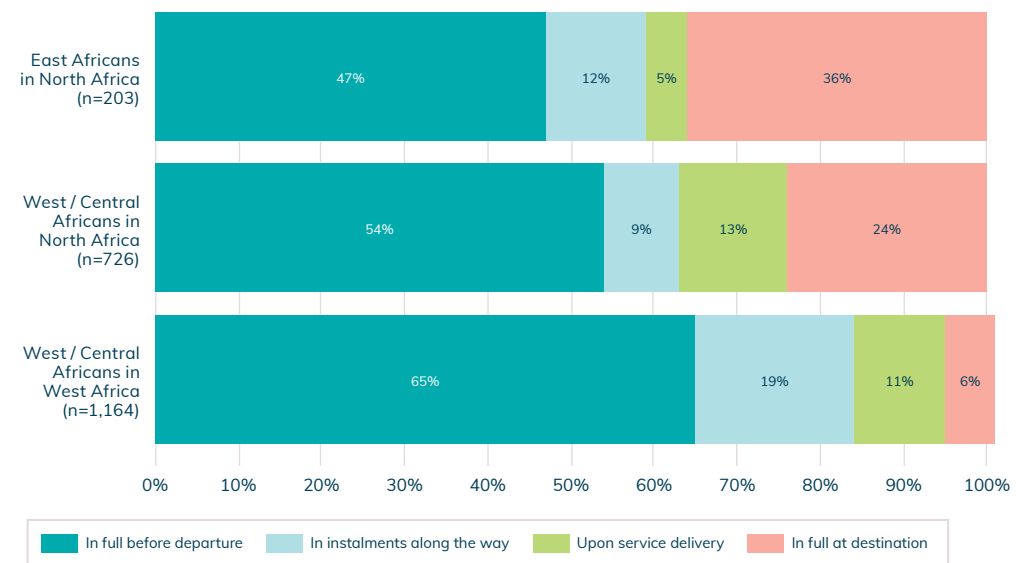


Note: For information, respondents reported in the following currencies: Burkina Faso: 100% CFA; Mali: 100% CFA; Niger: 95% CFA, 4% USD; Libya (West/Central Africans): 22% CFA, 74% USD, 5% EUR; Tunisia (West/Central Africans): 23% CFA, 21% USD, 56% EUR; Libya (East Africans): 3% CFA, 84% USD, 13% EUR; Tunisia (East Africans): 2% CFA, 85% USD, 13% EUR.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, respondents reported having paid a wide range of smuggling fees so far, with some extreme outliers in every country of interview. However, there are some patterns: fees paid in West Africa are lower than those paid by people interviewed in North Africa, with far higher fees having been paid by those who have reached Tunisia. Mean fees reportedly paid to smugglers in West Africa were USD 181 in Burkina Faso, USD 224 in Mali, and 197 in Niger. In North Africa, West and Central Africans report having paid so far an average of USD 751 in Libya, and USD 1,027 in Tunisia. East Africans report an average so far of USD 365 in Libya and USD 4,020 in Tunisia.

The majority of respondents pay smugglers before departure, particularly West and Central Africans

Figure 4. How did you pay the smuggler(s)?



Overall, 59% of participants who responded said they paid the smuggler before embarking on the journey (n=2,093). This share was higher among West and Central Africans in West Africa, at 65%, and lower among respondents in North Africa. 24% of West and Central Africans in North Africa paid upon arrival, as did 36% of East Africans in North Africa.

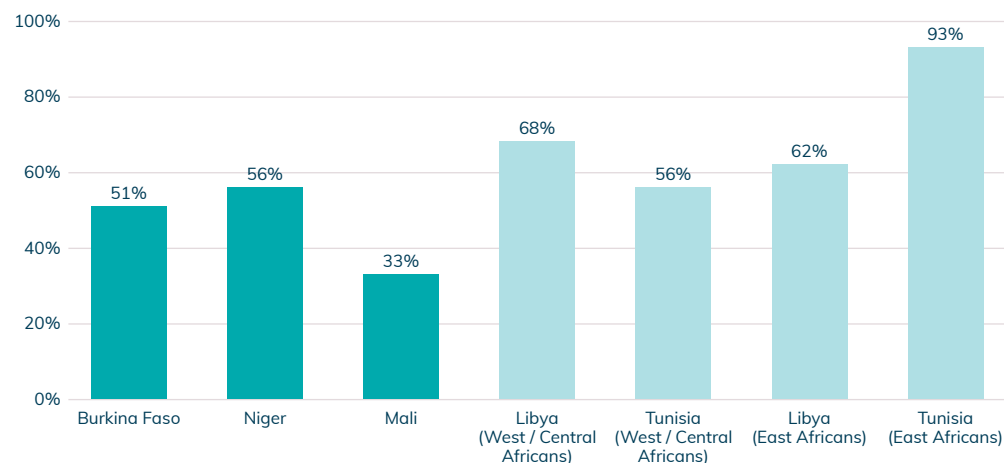
95% of smugglers reported that payments were made in cash directly by the migrants, and this was consistent across country of interview (n=356, question is multi-select). Other payment methods cited by smugglers include Western union/bank transfer (29%), mobile money (27%) and hawala/informal money transfer (23%). Responses were consistent across country of interview, with Tunisia an exception. Bank transfer or Western Union was far more common among smugglers interviewed in Tunisia (47%), as was Hawala/informal transfer (39%); mobile money was lowest in Tunisia (18%). A lower proportion of people interviewed in Tunisia paid in full at departure than others, and mobile money options are limited, and different to those available in West Africa.

Smuggling fees make up a bigger share of journey costs among respondents in North Africa

Respondents indicated that **60% of their journey costs were dedicated to smuggling**. Among East African respondents, those interviewed in Libya on average dedicated 62% of their expenses to smugglers, while the proportion grew to 93% among those interviewed in Tunisia. Among West and Central African respondents, smuggling services comprised 33% of expenditures for respondents interviewed in Mali, Burkina Faso 51%, Niger 56%, Tunisia 56% and Libya 68%. The share of journey costs spent on smugglers increases for those who reach North Africa. Crossing the Sahara Desert very often requires a smuggler, and in Libya it is common for migrants and refugees to be detained, and to have to pay for release: smugglers are among those who are paid to secure release. There is evidence of refugees and migrants in Libya being repeatedly detained by smugglers, and released after ransoms are paid, as well as smugglers paying authorities to release migrants from detention,³ which leads to refugees and migrants paying smugglers beyond agreed and planned amounts.

3 See our earlier snapshot, MMC West Africa and North Africa, [Corruption and the Role of State Officials in Human Smuggling](#), December 2021, page 3.

Figure 5. Smuggling fees as a proportion of journey costs, by country of interview



Note: This data includes costs reported in CFA, EUR and USD. In Burkina Faso all costs were reported as CFA; in Niger and Mali, CFA were reported by 95% and 99% of the sample, respectively; in Libya, USD were reported by 74% of the West / Central Africa sample, and in Tunisia 56% of West / Central Africans reported EUR; 85% of East Africans reported USD in both Tunisia and Libya. People reporting costs in USD and EUR generally report smugglers' fees as a higher proportion of costs than those reporting in CFA. Sample size varies: not all respondents answered both the question on journey costs and the question on smuggler fees.

It is noteworthy that respondents in Mali report a lower proportion spent on smugglers' fees than in other countries, including its neighbours in West Africa. While respondents in all three countries reported similar expenditures on smuggler fees, interviewees in Mali reported having spent more in total on the journey than those in Niger and Burkina Faso (this may be related to the journey having taken longer: 3.2 months for respondents in Mali, compared to 2.4 and 0.6 month on average in Niger and Burkina Faso, respectively).

Smugglers' prices mostly going up due to the risks linked to increased government controls

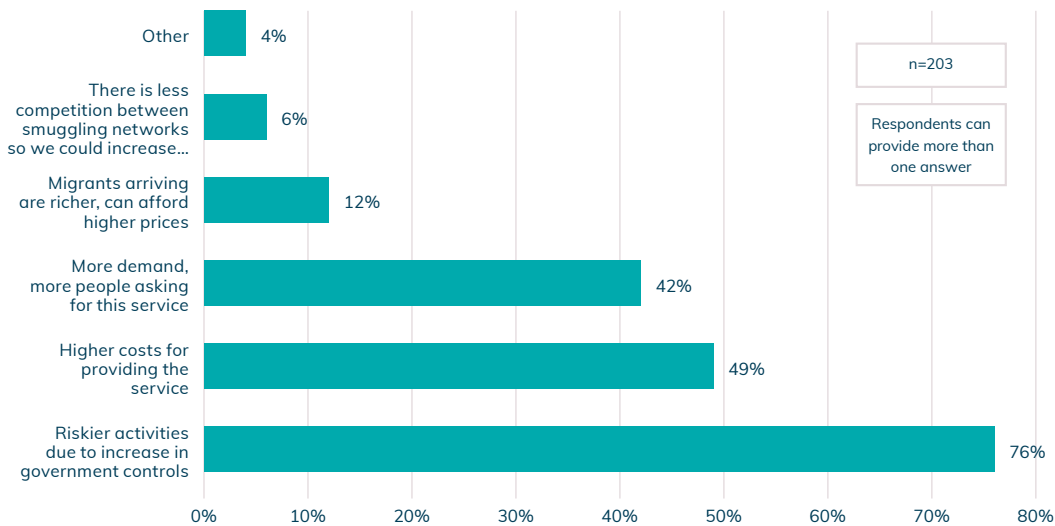
About half of the smugglers interviewed (49%) reported that they charged refugees and migrants directly, rather than somebody else receiving the money. The proportion ranged from a low of 43% among smugglers interviewed in Mali to 55% in Niger.

Of those who said they were paid directly and reported a figure, the average fee ranges between USD 253 in Burkina Faso, USD 347 in Niger, USD 542 in Mali, to USD 943 in

Libya and USD 1,434 in Tunisia. (The vast majority in West Africa report fees in CFA, the majority in Libya report in USD, and in Tunisia just over half report in EUR, followed by Tunisian dinars.)

Smugglers indicated a variety of factors that affect the price they charge migrants, including security along the route (40%) and the type of service provided (39%), but also the frequency of government controls (28%), the nationality of the client (23%) or the season (22%). While 36% of smugglers reported that the amounts they charge have not changed in the last 6 months prior to the interview, **most smugglers (57%, and a majority in every country except Tunisia) report that the amounts they charge to refugees and migrants have increased in the last 6 months.** They explain that the activities are becoming riskier due to government measures (76% of respondents), but also due to the higher costs for providing this service (49%) and to an increase in demand (42%).

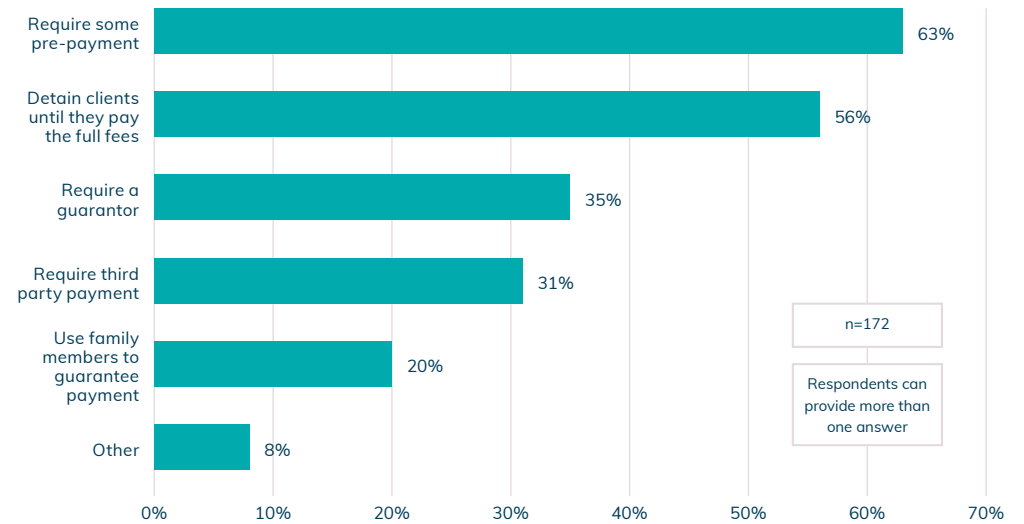
Figure 6. Reasons for smugglers' price increase in the past 6 months



Multiple methods – including detention – used to guarantee payment

Smugglers indicated that they **guarantee payment mainly by requesting pre-payment (63%)**, which corresponds to what refugees and migrants report about primarily paying before departure. However, multiple methods were reported, and – of serious concern in terms of human rights violations – **a majority of smugglers who responded (56%; n=97) also said that they detain clients until they paid the full amount**, 31% resorted to a guarantor (31%) and 20% to payment by a third party. Smugglers interviewed in Libya and Tunisia reported detention more frequently than any other methods (76% and 64%, respectively), and more frequently than respondents in other countries.

Figure 7. How do you guarantee payment?



Earnings and market size

Smugglers surveyed in West Africa reported earning an average of USD 1,535 in the month prior to the interview (n=131).⁴ Those surveyed in Libya indicated that they had earned USD 6,579 USD (n=21), and those in Tunisia USD 1,192 (n=19) on average. Monthly minimum wages in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are between USD 61 and 68, while in Libya the figure is USD 354 and in Tunisia USD 166.⁵ These findings support existing research on the profitability of smuggling.

Combining the data collected by 4Mi with the number of people arriving in Tunisia and Libya in 2021 can provide an estimate of the size of the human smuggling market along this route (as far as Tunisia and Libya – if the Mediterranean crossing were to be included, the figure would be much higher). Given the hidden nature of human smuggling, and consequent limitations in terms of sampling, this figure is inevitably a very rough estimate. Our data indicate that smuggling fees to reach Tunisia from East, Central or West Africa average USD 1,781, and fees to reach Libya average USD 676. It seems likely that this does not cover the cost of crossing the Mediterranean, even for those whose destination is Europe, and in many cases for those who believed they have paid for the crossing. Qualitative data suggests many have to pay ‘again’ for the sea crossing, and other sources indicate that the sea crossing costs as much or more than the average fees reported by our respondents who have travelled to Libya or Tunisia.⁶

2021 figures from IOM’s DTM for Libya, and UNHCR figures for Tunisia, suggest 94,007 people from sub-Saharan Africa crossed land borders to reach Libya or Tunisia in 2021.⁷ (This is likely to be an underestimate given the difficulties monitoring smuggling routes and movements, and a particular lack of data regarding arrivals in Tunisia.) 4Mi data suggest that 91% of people who arrived in Libya used a smuggler, and 67% of people who arrived in Tunisia used a smuggler (note that 4Mi sampling is not entirely random

4 28% of smugglers interviewed refused to answer this question, and 19% said they didn’t know

5 ILOSTAT, “Statistics on Wages”, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/wages/>

6 Frontex, After the money: Prices for people smuggling on Central and Western Mediterranean routes, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/after-the-money-prices-for-people-smuggling-on-central-and-western-mediterranean-routes-EHDfjg>

7 The number of arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya in 2021 (89,408) is calculated based on Flow Monitoring reports for [Niger](#) and [Libya](#), which measure numbers of people on migration routes, the proportion heading to Libya, and also the borders crossed to reach Libya by those who arrived in Libya. The number of arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa to Tunisia in 2021 (4,599) is based on UNHCR reports on [mixed movements](#) and [registrations](#) until November 2021. Information on people arriving on these routes who originated from other regions (e.g. Syrians) was excluded.

but the sampling approach implemented in Tunisia and Libya should mean that it is random in relation to this variable, i.e. use of a smuggler, on mixed migration routes from sub-Saharan Africa). Taking all these numbers into account, we arrive at **a market size of USD 60.5 million for smuggling people travelling from East and West Africa to Libya and Tunisia in 2021**. Notwithstanding its limitations, this estimate gives an idea of the money changing hands to enable people to move north across Africa, despite numerous measures in recent years to crack down on human smuggling.



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