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Centre



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Secondary actors: the role of smugglers in mixed migration through the Americas

About this paper

This paper explores the use of smugglers by Latin American and Caribbean migrants on their journeys to North America. It is based on responses to more than 3,000 4Mi¹ surveys conducted in Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico in 2022 and 2023 and includes findings

on profiles of migrants who hired smugglers as well as information on the services they sought and their general perceptions of smugglers. As such, this paper provides a wealth of solid empirical evidence with a view to informing the work of policymakers and humanitarian actors.

Key findings

- Smuggler use is far from the norm: two out of every five survey respondents hired smugglers during their migration journey.
- The demand for smuggling services in Latin America and the Caribbean is driven by geographic and political barriers to mobility between countries, including the lack of safe and regular pathways to migrate and the absence of formal services and infrastructure (such as transportation and accommodation) along the migratory routes.
- Respondents surveyed in 2022 and 2023 reported using smugglers at rates of 49% and 34% respectively. This decline could be the consequence of an increase in the overall number of people on the move in the region, the greater use and sharing of maps by people on the move, and the reopening of the border between Colombia and Venezuela.
- A fifth of respondents (20%) who used smugglers identified them as potential perpetrators of abuse that may occur in the most dangerous locations on their migration journey.
- Just 6% of respondents said they saw smugglers as a potential source of protection during their migration journey.
- Respondents who reported using smugglers mostly identified them as service providers who helped them to cross borders irregularly and to travel within transit countries. More than half said smugglers had helped them achieve their migration goals.
- Despite marketing their services widely on social networks, smugglers played a negligible role in decisions to migrate.

A note on “smuggling” and “smugglers”

MMC defines migrant smuggling as any of a wide range of activities—including facilitating irregular border crossings, supplying travel documents, and providing transportation, food and accommodation during a migration journey—carried out in return for payment or other forms of compensation.² Despite the existence of an international legislative framework on smuggling, MMC does not necessarily consider all activities contemplated in this definition as criminal actions.³

Depending on their location, migrants in the Americas use a variety of terms for such service providers, such as guides, *trocheros*, *facilitators*, *coyotes*, *cargueros*, and *polleros*. While 4Mi enumerators reference geographically appropriate terms in their interactions with respondents, the survey uses “smuggler” as an umbrella term for all of them.

1 4Mi is MMC’s flagship quantitative data collection project. 4Mi’s questionnaires cover why people left, the alternatives they explored, destination choices, influences on decision-making, and much more (4Mi data can be accessed through [4Mi Interactive](#)).

2 In Central America, some smugglers reportedly receive homes, title deeds and other assets in return for their services. See: Dudley, S., Asmann, P. & Dittmar V. (2023) [Unintended Consequences: How US Immigration Policy Fosters Organized Crime on the US-Mexico Border](#). InSight Crime.

3 For more information on MMC’s terminology, see: Mixed Migration Centre (2021) [MMC’s understanding and use of the terms Mixed migration and Human smuggling](#). | The international instrument covering smuggling is the 2000 [Protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#).

Introduction

The use of smugglers by people on the move through Latin America and the Caribbean is far from a new phenomenon. Indeed, on the US-Mexico border, it dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and the introduction there of restrictive border control policies.⁴ In the 1990s, transit restrictions between Central American countries also contributed to the growth of people smuggling, as did political barriers imposed on leaving some Caribbean islands since the end of the 20th century.⁵ Opportunities for smugglers across South America took off in the mid-2010s when the political and economic crises in Venezuela prompted vast numbers of Venezuelans to leave their country in search of better opportunities elsewhere in the region.⁶

Travelling through the Darien Gap, a perilous jungle region straddling the Colombia-Panama border and on the main land route between South and Central America, was virtually impossible without the assistance or authorization of the smugglers and criminal groups who control the region.⁷ Transit along this route has become more frequent since 2021 due to the increase in restrictive immigration policies in Mexico and Central American countries promoted by the United States in an attempt to reduce arrivals to the US.⁸

Migrants' use of smugglers is the subject of much global and regional debate. Institutional and media statements portray smugglers as the main "responsible" parties or

driving forces behind massive migratory movements.⁹ In the Latin America and Caribbean region, they are also reputed to be members of large networks linked to drug trafficking and other criminal activities and as perpetrators of violence, deceit, and abandonment against migrants.¹⁰

Such negative views are not widely reflected in 4Mi surveys, whose respondents generally report that smugglers do not influence their decisions to migrate. Many respondents perceive smugglers as providers of services that help them achieve their migration goals. However, some of the respondents in this paper's sample reported that smugglers they used deliberately misled them (39%), while 20% of those who reported using smugglers identified them as the likely perpetrators of violent acts that may occur in the most dangerous places on the migratory journey.

Different smuggler profiles and services coexist in the region. Some smugglers may be members of communities located in marginalised areas along the main migratory routes where economic opportunities are scant, while others may be affiliated with drug trafficking networks, organised crime gangs and armed groups which, in response to the increase in migratory movements, branched out into the people smuggling business, either directly or by partnering with existing smugglers.

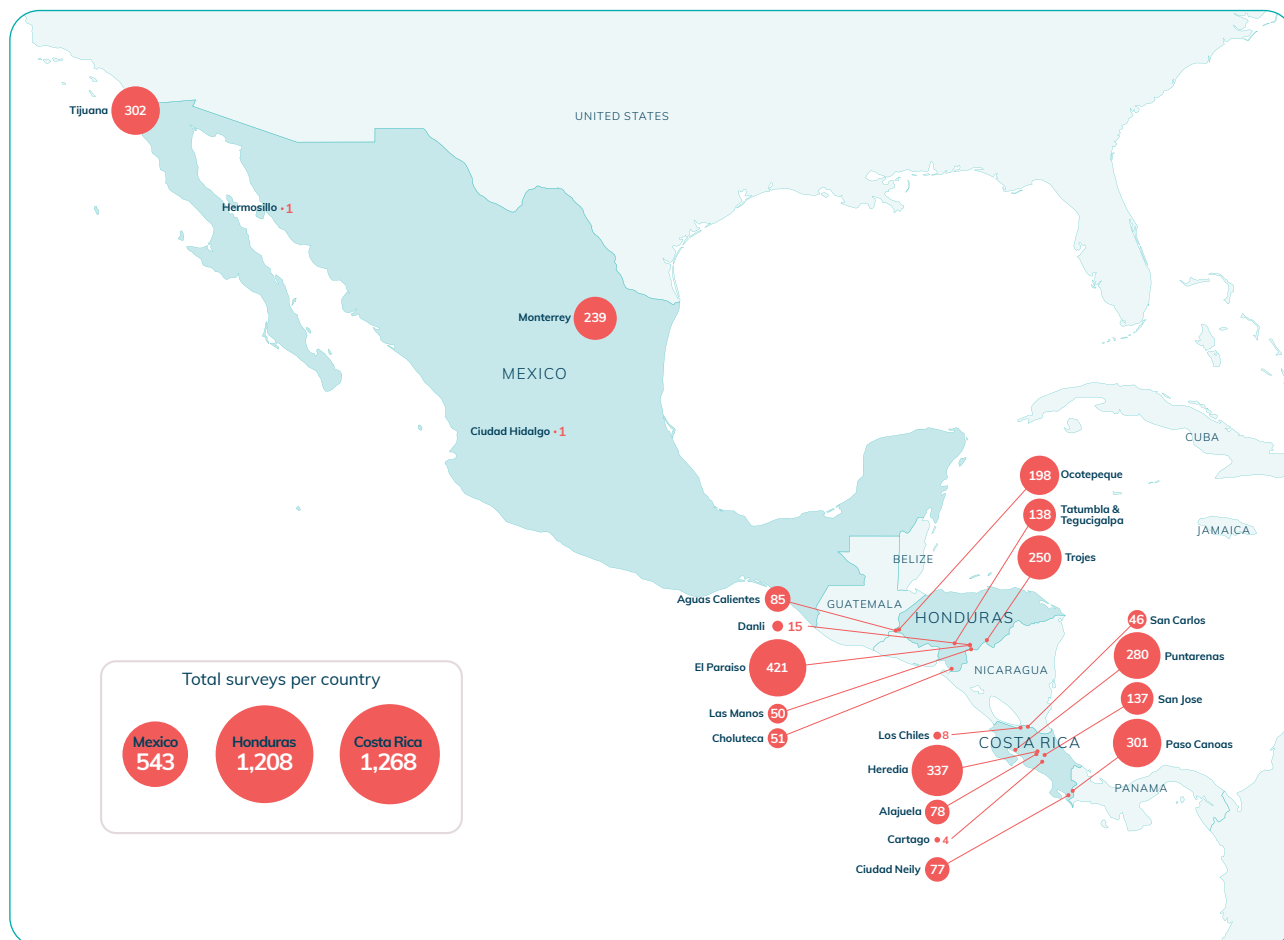
Methodology

This paper is based on an analysis of responses to 4Mi surveys¹¹ of 3,019 Latin American and Caribbean migrants conducted between May 2022 and September 2023 at points along the region's main migration routes

in Costa Rica (1,268 respondents), Honduras (1,208) and Mexico (543).

- 4 Andrade, K., Trejo Guzmán, N., & Mora Vásquez, A. (2022) [El tráfico de migrantes en la frontera México-Estados Unidos](#). Revista Guillermo de Ockham.
- 5 Dudley, S., Asmann, P. & Dittmar V. (2023) [Unintended Consequences: How US Immigration Policy Foments Organized Crime on the US-Mexico Border](#). InSight Crime | Medina Cuenca, A. (2014) [Migraciones, tráfico de personas y otras figuras afines, y la protección penal del normal tráfico migratorio en Cuba](#). Revista Misión Jurídica. | Clot, J. & Martínez Velasco, G. (2018) [La «odisea» de los migrantes cubanos en América: modalidades, rutas y etapas migratorias](#). Revista digital Pueblos y Fronteras.
- 6 InSight Crime (2019) [Trails Along Colombia-Venezuela Border Are Criminal Enclaves](#) | Estoy en la frontera (2020) [Organizaciones alertan riesgos para migrantes tras cierre de frontera por COVID-19](#) | Testa, G. (2019) [Waning welcome: the growing challenges facing mixed migration flows from Venezuela](#). Mixed Migration Centre.
- 7 National Geographic (2023) [¿Por qué la selva del Darién es conocida como una de las más peligrosas del mundo?](#)
- 8 The visa requirements imposed by Central American and Mexican countries for certain nationalities have created obstacles for people on the move, preventing them from flying directly to their intended destinations in the north. Consequently, they are compelled to undertake longer and more perilous overland routes to reach Central America. See: Human Rights Watch (2023) ["This Hell Was My Only Option" Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darién Gap](#).
- 9 See: Forbes (2023). [Traficantes de personas organizan las caravanas migrantes para llegar a EU, dice López Obrador](#). | Flores, R., Weisfeldt, S. & Álvarez, P. (2023) [Aumento de migrantes es impulsado por agencias de viaje que los contactan con contrabandistas, según funcionario de la CBP](#).
- 10 Andrade, K., Trejo Guzmán, N., & Mora Vásquez, A. (2022) [El tráfico de migrantes en la frontera México-Estados Unidos](#). Revista Guillermo de Ockham.
- 11 See: Mixed Migration Centre (n.d.) [4Mi](#).

Map 1. 4Mi Survey collection locations



Respondent profiles

Respondents were almost equally divided between women (49%) and men (51%). In terms of age distribution, 79% were between 18 and 35 years old, 17% between 36 and 45, and 4% were older than 45.

Because this paper explores trends in the use of smugglers by Latin American and Caribbean migrants heading northwards, it draws on the survey responses of

people who began their journeys in Venezuela, Colombia, Central America, or the Caribbean. In this dataset, 66% of respondents were Venezuelan, 12% Colombian, 2% from other South American countries (Ecuador, Peru and Chile), 6% from Cuba, 1.5% from other Caribbean countries (Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica) and 12.5% from Central American countries (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama).

Limitations

This study has three main limitations:

- This paper draws much of its analysis from responses to the 4Mi survey question “Did you use a smuggler during your trip?” MMC recognises that many respondents may underreport their use of smugglers for fear of possible retaliation from their smugglers or institutional prosecution.
- The 4Mi survey employs direct purposive sampling in that its respondents are adult migrants selected at key locations and who agree to participate. Therefore, respondents are not necessarily representative of all people in mixed migration flows in the region, or of smuggler use there.
- Most respondents (some 80%) were nationals of South American countries who began their journey in South America. As a result of this (unintentional) geographical bias, less data was available about people who had begun their journeys in Central America or the Caribbean.

Main observations

Prevalence of smuggler use

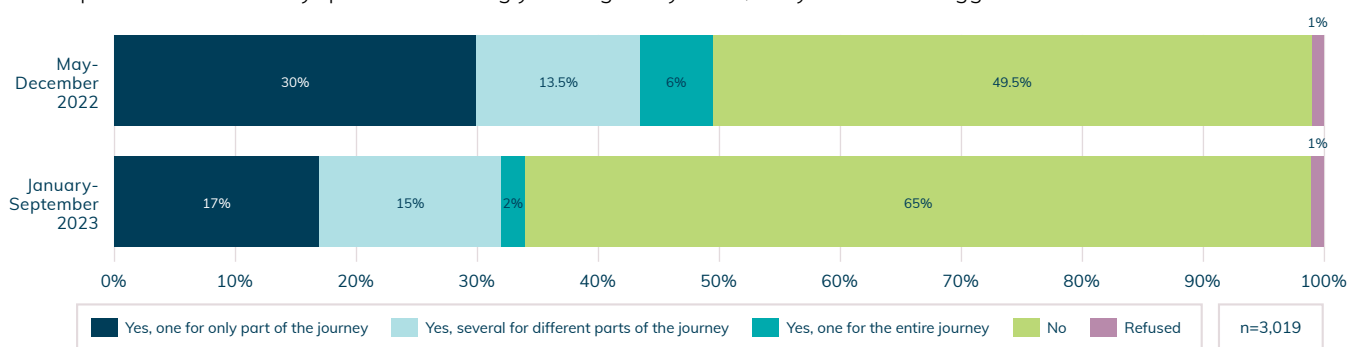
Contrary to popular perception, media reports and much political discourse, the survey data suggests that smuggler use by migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean is currently far from the norm. The dynamics of using smugglers have varied over time depending on the magnitude of migratory movements; the opening of new, little-used or geographically complex routes; and the implementation of new restrictive migration policies.

Two of every five respondents reported hiring smugglers on their journey northward

Just under 39% of all respondents reported having hired at least one smuggler along their migration route. Of these 1,167 respondents, 54% hired smugglers for only part of the trip, 37% for several sections, and 9% for the entire migratory route up to the time of the survey, see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Prevalence of smuggler use

Responses to 4Mi survey question: “During your migratory route, did you use a smuggler?”



Use of smugglers declined between 2022 and 2023

A higher proportion of those surveyed in 2022 (49% of 904 respondents) reported having used smugglers than those surveyed in 2023 (34% of 2,115).

This decrease might be attributable to the fact that in 2023 more people were migrating northward—and more were doing so in large groups or “caravans”—and therefore may have travelled with a greater sense of “safety in numbers” and with less perceived risk of getting lost. For example, between 2022 and 2023, the number of people crossing the Darien Gap doubled from 248,000 to more than half a million.¹² A similar number travelled northwards through Honduras.¹³ In the 2023 fiscal year, there were more than 2.4 million apprehensions of people on the move at the US borders, a historic record.¹⁴

As the number of people on the move in the region rises, it is increasingly common for them to share information on migratory routes through social networks and messaging apps.¹⁵ This may explain why fewer of them see a need to hire smugglers. Moreover, many Latin Americans migrate following mapped routes, without sufficient funds¹⁶ to pay for guides or other migrant smuggling services.

The gradual re-establishment beginning in August 2022 of diplomatic relations between Colombia and Venezuela led to the re-opening of their common border and the resumption of regular commercial flights between the two countries.¹⁷ This greatly reduced migrants’ use of *trocheros*¹⁸ to cross the border compared to when it was closed between 2019 and 2022. The proportion of surveyed Venezuelans (66% of the total sample) who reported hiring smugglers decreased from 55% in 2022 (284 of 516 respondents) to 37% in 2023 (547 of 1,475).

12 Over 520,000 people crossed the Darien Gap in 2023. National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) [Tránsito irregular por el Darién](#). Accessed January 23, 2024.

13 In 2023, 565,545 people migrated north through Honduras. National Institute of Migration of Honduras (n.d.) [Migración irregular](#). Accessed January 23, 2024.

14 New York Times (2023). [Crossings at the U.S. Southern Border Are Higher Than Ever](#)

15 Tomasi, S. & Vicari, D. (2023) [Digital lifelines: The use of social media networks among Venezuelan refugees and migrants heading north](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

16 UNICEF (2023). [Child alert: Child migration in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (p15).

17 Diplomatic relations were severed in February 2019, and the border remained closed from March 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, until September 2022. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia (2023) [Relaciones diplomáticas con Venezuela](#). | Portafolio (2022) [Vuelos Colombia-Venezuela](#).

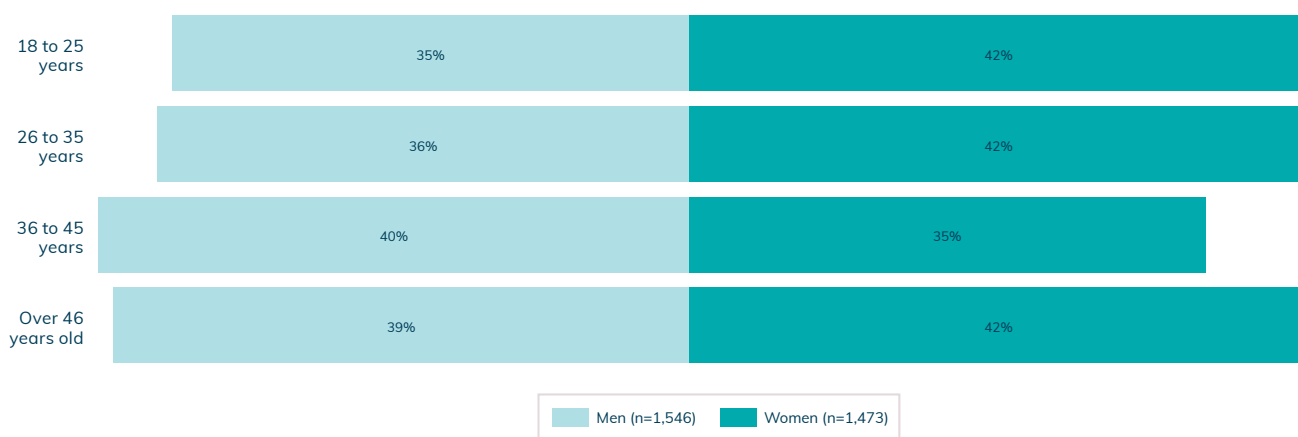
18 *Trocheros* is the most common name for smugglers on the Colombian-Venezuelan border. See: Brito, H. (2021) [«Trochero», el término que condena a la migración venezolana](#). Papagayo News.

Profiles of smuggler users

Female respondents reported using smugglers to a slightly greater extent than their male counterparts, with 41% (606 of 1,473) of surveyed women saying they had done so compared to 36% (561 of 1,546) of

men. In terms of age, the use of smugglers only varied slightly among respondents between 36 and 45 years of age, see Figure 2.

Figure 2: Age and sex distribution of smuggler users

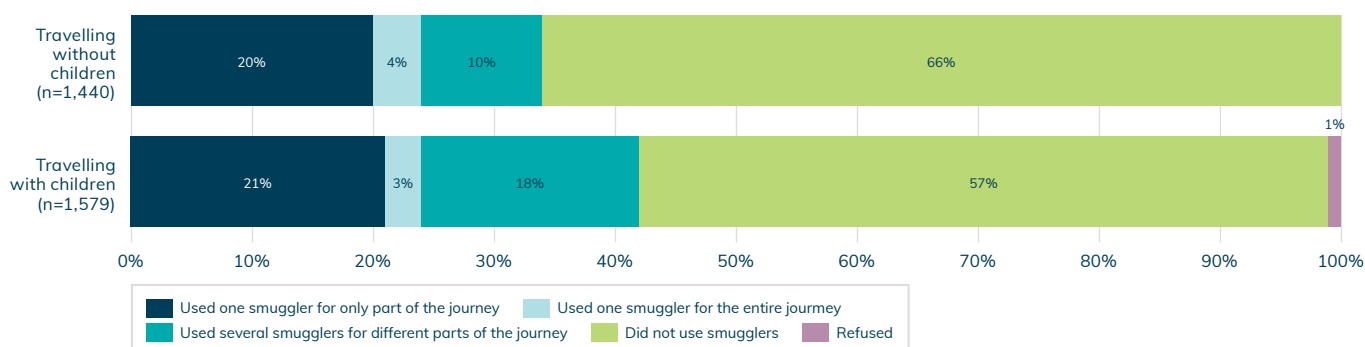


Travelling with children correlates with greater use of (multiple) smugglers

Some 43% of the 1,579 respondents who identified as caregivers (defined as those migrating with children in their care)¹⁹ reported having hired smugglers, compared

to 34% of the 1,440 respondents who said they were travelling without children. Moreover, 18% of caregivers reported using more than one smuggler on different legs of their journey, compared to 10% of non-caregivers, see Figure 3.

Figure 3. Smuggler use: caregivers vs non-caregivers



This difference may be related to the fact that migrant caregivers face greater mobility difficulties along the route. Previous research by MMC and UNICEF shows that migrants with children in their care travel slower, are more likely to suffer from diseases and are more susceptible to security threats or abuses since perpetrators of violence often identify children on the move as easier targets.²⁰

Migrants with children in their care may, therefore, feel a need for more support, companionship and protection in difficult transit areas, even if this represents an additional cost in terms of hiring smugglers.²¹

Furthermore, according to the surveys conducted in Honduras, this difference was greater with respect to

19 For more information about such caregivers, see: Canal Laiton, X. (2023). [Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

20 Canal Laiton, X. (2023). [Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

21 Information gathered by MMC from secondary sources shows that the costs of hiring smugglers in the region can be up to [US\\$ 10,000](#) and that migrants are charged for every person in their group. Although some smugglers offer discounts for children, recruitment prices rise when groups migrate with underage members.

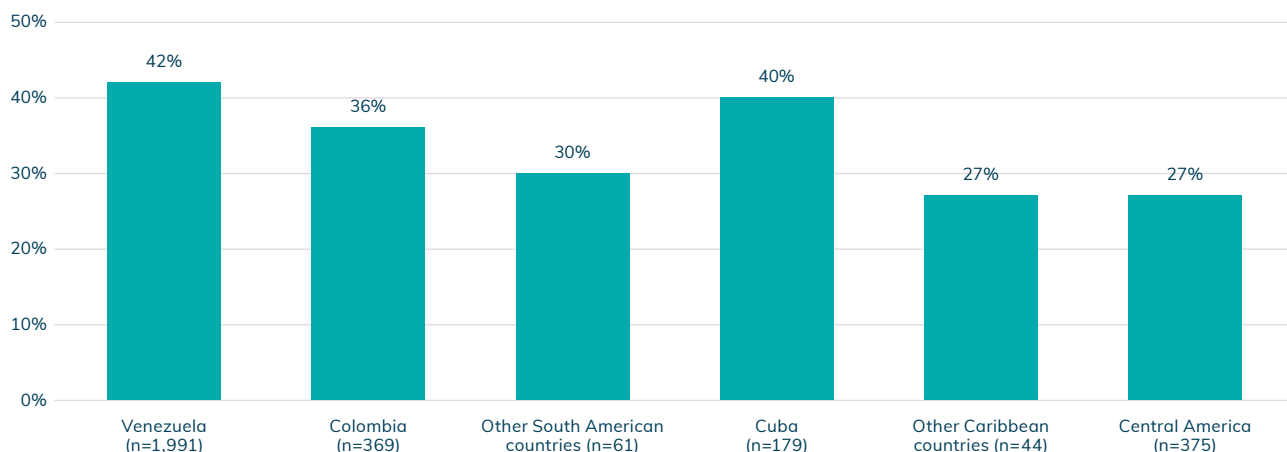
caregivers who were solely responsible for children on the migration route.²² Of these 461 respondents, 31% reported hiring multiple smugglers for different parts of the trip, compared to 18% of the 575 caregivers who shared childcare responsibilities with someone else as they travelled.

Venezuelans and Cubans used smugglers more often than nationals of other countries

Venezuelan and Cuban respondents reported using smugglers to a greater extent than other respondents, with 42% of the former (who numbered 831) and 40% of the latter (72) so reporting. Both numbers are slightly higher than the overall average of 39%, see Figure 4.

Figure 4: Smuggler use by respondents' country/region of origin

Respondents who answered "Yes" to the 4Mi survey question: "During your migratory route, did you use a smuggler?"



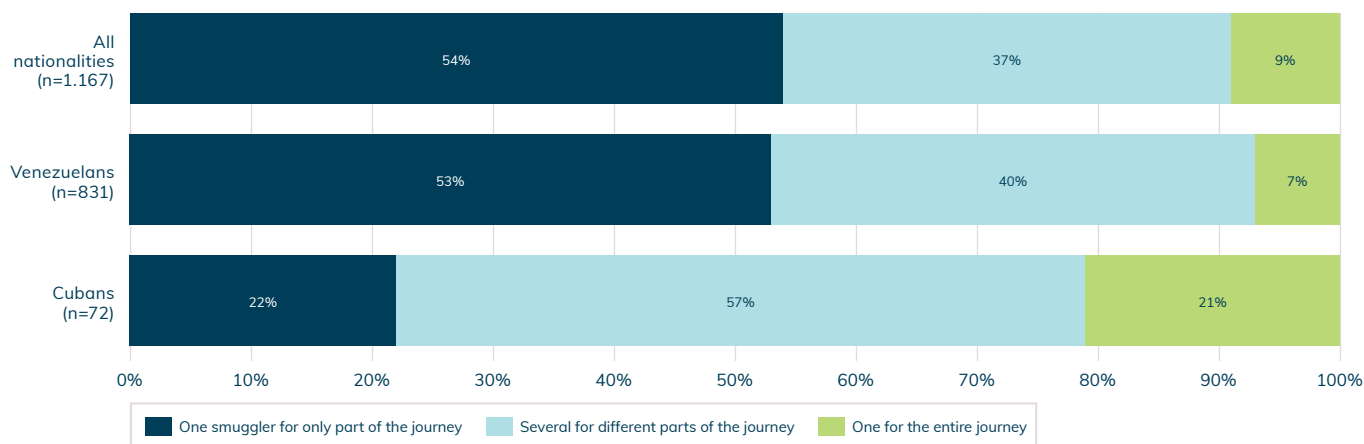
A little over half (53%) of the 831 Venezuelan respondents who reported using a smuggler hired one for a single leg of their trip, while 40% hired several smugglers for several legs, see Figure 5.

The actual proportion of Cuban migrants travelling with the assistance of smugglers is likely to be much greater than the above-mentioned 40%: 4Mi enumerators in Honduras observed that almost all Cubans migrating through the country did so in the company of smugglers, which made it difficult to approach them as potential survey participants.

Fifty-seven percent of the 72 Cuban respondents who did report using smugglers said they had hired several for different legs of the route, while 21% said they used the same smuggler for the entire trip as part of an all-inclusive package that covered departure from the country of origin, transportation and border crossings and, in some cases, lodging and food en route. Proportionally, Cuban respondents used such packages more than nationals of any other country.

Figure 5: Extent of smuggler use

By respondents who reported using smugglers



22 Relevant disaggregated data was only available in the surveys conducted in Honduras, which emphasized the migration experiences of children and youth. See: Mixed Migration Centre & UNICEF (2023) [Interactive dashboard | Children, youth and caregivers on the move through Honduras](#).

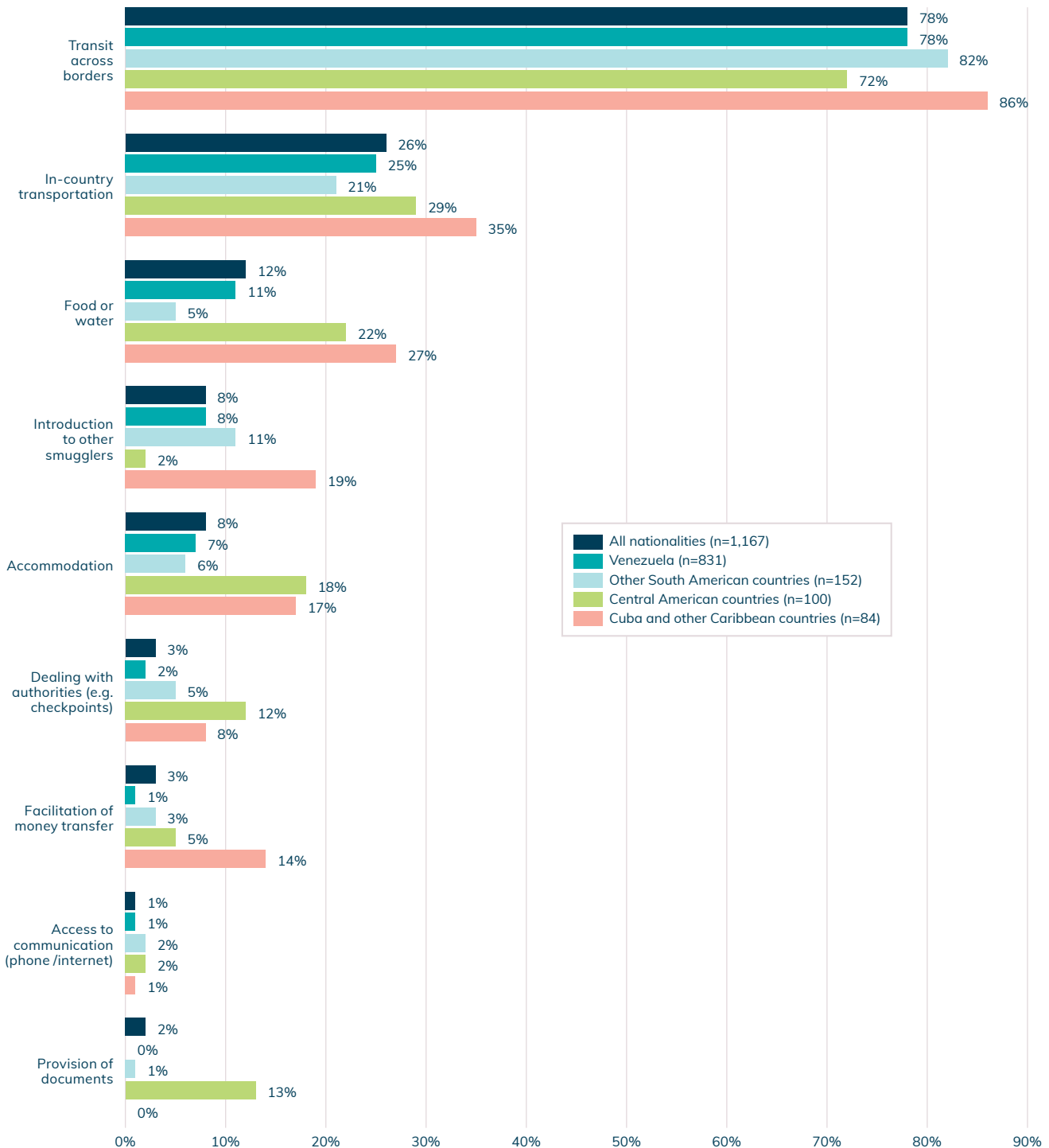
Services provided by smugglers

Crossing borders was the most popular smuggling service...

By far the most frequently used smuggling service cited in survey responses was help crossing borders, which 78% of respondents reported. Internal transportation in transit countries took a distant second place, at 26%. As

in much of the world, it is common for migrants transiting the Americas to recruit smugglers to irregularly cross borders that are subject to restrictive migratory controls, and to use informal transportation services at border crossings or transit areas where no institutional help is available.

Figure 6: Services provided by smugglers, by respondents' country/region of origin²³



²³ Respondents who reported using smugglers were asked to select all services that smugglers had provided them.

Smugglers provided border-crossing services to 86% of the Caribbean respondents who used smugglers, a proportion that is greater than for any other nationality.

It is common for migrants from the Caribbean islands to use smugglers from their countries of origin because geographic, political and/or economic conditions make it difficult to leave such countries without hiring people who offer irregular air or maritime transportation services.

In November 2021, when Nicaragua stopped requiring Cuban arrivals to have visas, the number of regular flights from Cuba to Nicaragua increased substantially.²⁴ Since then, a significant number of Cubans have started their migratory journey on such flights,²⁵ continuing overland through Central America with the help of coyotes contacted before leaving Cuba.²⁶

The high cost of regular air travel and the political and economic barriers to regular maritime transportation from the Caribbean to the United States have led smugglers to sell seats for such journeys aboard rafts

or motorboats, where safety is often compromised.²⁷ The relative popularity of all-inclusive packages among Caribbean respondents is illustrated by the wide range of smuggler services they used while migrating.

...but smugglers also provided a range of other services

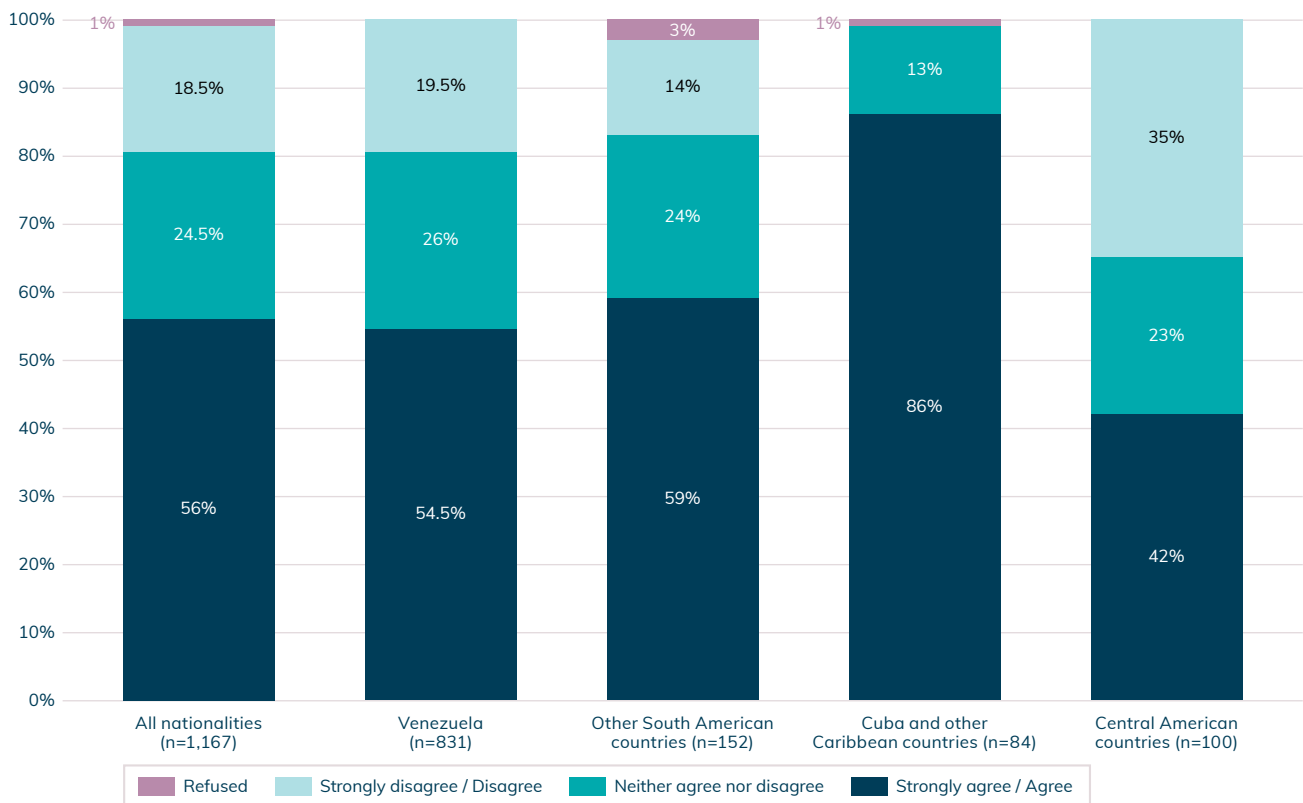
Aside from irregular border crossings, Caribbean and Central American respondents frequently used the services of smugglers for internal transportation in the countries along the route, as well as for the provision of food, water and lodging. With the exception of those from Central America, only a tiny percentage of respondents obtained documents from smugglers.

Smugglers helped most respondents to achieve migration goals

A little over half (56%) of the 1,167 respondents who reported using smugglers agreed or strongly agreed that smugglers helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country, while 18.5% stated that their smugglers did not help them achieve that goal, see Figure 7.

Figure 7: Customer satisfaction, by respondents' country/region of origin

Responses to 4Mi survey question: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement? 'The smuggler(s) I used helped me achieve my goal of migrating to another country.'"



24 Amerise, A. (2022) [Cuba: 4 razones que explican el histórico éxodo desde la isla a EE. UU. en 2022](#). BBC.
 25 According to [U.S. Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\) data](#), nearly 40,000 Cubans arrived at the southern border between November 2021 and February 2022. In the entire previous fiscal year, between October 2020 and October 2021, the figure was just over 38,000.
 26 El Toque (2022) [Rutas migratorias de los cubanos hacia Estados Unidos](#). YouTube | In November 2023, the US government imposed visa restrictions on individuals who operate flights into Nicaragua for irregular migrants heading north to the US. However, despite these restrictions to limit flights, migration through Managua's airport reportedly remains prevalent. See: U.S. Department of State (2023) [Visa Restriction Policy for Flight Operators Facilitating Irregular Migration](#) | Periódico Cubano (2024). [Flights to Nicaragua from Cuba continue in January despite U.S. pressure](#).
 27 See: Pulzo (2023) [Cubanos usan redes para armar sus balsas y llegar a EE. UU.](#) | Salomon, G. (2022) [Más cubanos salen a EE. UU. por mar, tierra y avión](#). LA Times.

A much greater proportion (86%) of respondents from Cuba and Haiti than of those from other regions reported that smugglers had helped them achieve their migration goal, and no respondents from these two countries said that smugglers had not helped them in that regard.

A smaller share, albeit still a majority, (55%) of the South American respondents also agreed with the statement in the survey question, while 18% did not.

The least satisfied smuggler clients were respondents from Central America, 35% of whom disagreed with the statement, with 42% agreeing.

Some smugglers make misleading offers or swindle the population in transit. Two out of five respondents who used smugglers stated that the smugglers they hired had intentionally deceived them, and among Central American respondents this proportion was 45%, which is consistent with this group's high rate of disagreement with the relevant statement.

How smugglers were perceived by their clients

As explained on page 2 of this paper, the term “smuggler” covers a wide range of paid or otherwise compensated activities that facilitate irregular migration and (as noted in the Introduction) smugglers fit a variety of profiles, from members of communities living along the migration route, to individuals and networks linked to organised crime.

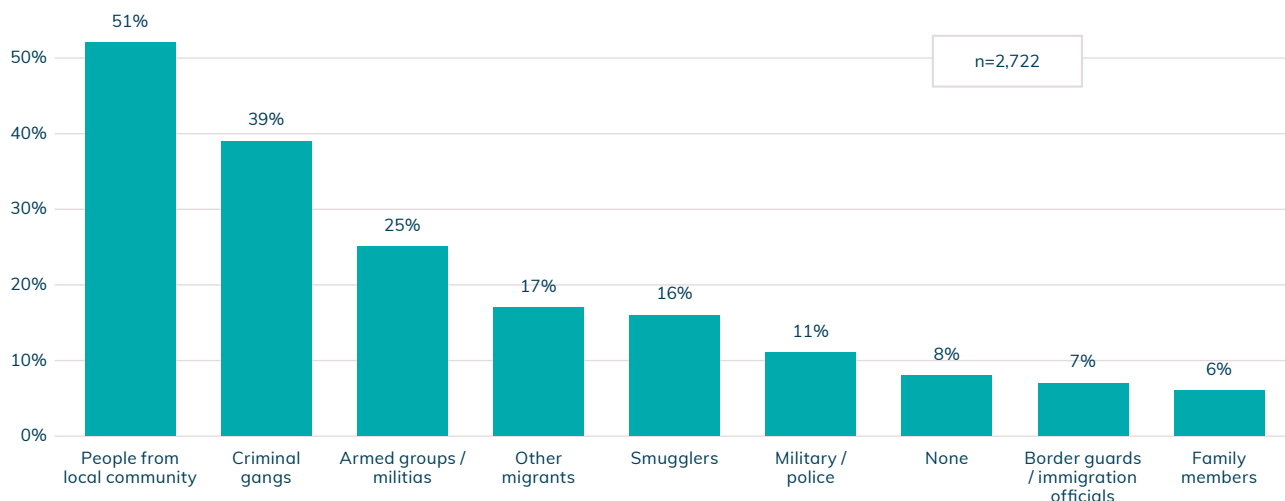
Smugglers were rarely seen as the main perpetrators of abuse during the journey

Fewer than a fifth of respondents (16%) reported

smugglers as possible perpetrators of abuses in the most dangerous locations of their migration journey. Other actors more frequently identified as feasible perpetrators included: local community members (51% of respondents), organised crime gangs (39%), armed groups (25%), and other migrants (17%), see Figure 8.²⁸ Respondents who had hired smugglers identified them as possible perpetrators (20%) to a slightly greater extent than those who had not (14%).²⁹

Figure 8: Perceptions of possible perpetrators of abuse along the migration route

Responses to 4Mi survey question about the perceived perpetrators of violence and abuse in locations identified as dangerous³⁰



Although smugglers are widely considered to be perpetrators of abuses against migrants in Mexico, only 9% of the 481 respondents who identified Mexico as being among the dangerous places on their route reported that smugglers were possibly responsible for

abuses in that country.³¹ More than half (54%) of these respondents instead pointed to organised crime gangs, and 28% to border guards and migration officials as likely perpetrators of abuse in Mexico.

28 The relevant survey question was answered by the 2,722 respondents who identified one or more locations as the most dangerous places on their route to the survey location. Of these, 440 (16%) said smugglers were among the perpetrators of abuse.

29 Respectively, 222 of 1,108 respondents (20%) who had hired smugglers, and 217 of 1,598 respondents (14%) who had not, both from the same cohort of 2,722 of which 16 people chose not to answer the question.

30 The percentages represent the proportion of respondents who identified those actors as possible perpetrators of violence in the dangerous places on the migratory journey. People could select more than one option for this question.

31 Andrade, K., Trejo Guzmán, N., & Mora Vásquez, A. (2022) [El tráfico de migrantes en la frontera México-Estados Unidos](#). Revista Guillermo de Ockham.

Smugglers were seldom hired to provide protection

On the whole, respondents did not see smugglers as security providers, so they used other mechanisms to protect themselves along the migratory route. Only 6% of all respondents stated they had considered hiring a smuggler to protect them from abuse and crime during the migration journey. Of those who hired smugglers, 16% included doing so among the steps they took to protect themselves en route, see Figure 9.

The proportion of respondents who did identify smugglers as protectors varied by country/region of origin, from 27%

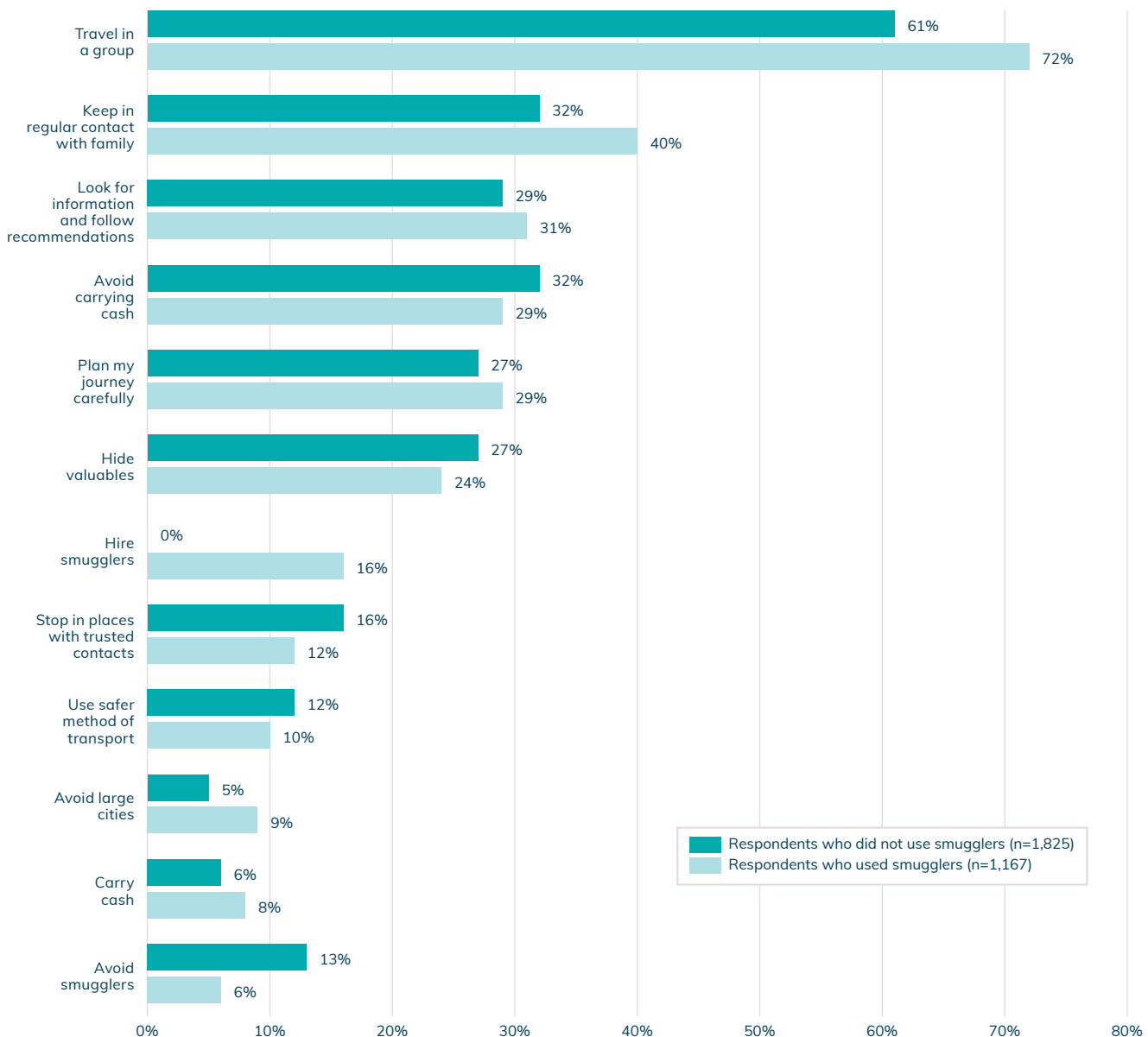
for Caribbean nationals and 23% for South Americans (other than Venezuelans) to 5% for Central Americans.

In contrast, 13% of the 1,825 respondents who did not use smugglers included avoiding smugglers among their protection measures.

The majority (65%) of all respondents travelled in groups to protect themselves from abuse and crime. This dynamic may be related to the decrease in the use of smugglers between 2022 and 2023.

Figure 9: Safety precautions

Responses to 4Mi survey question: "What do you do to protect yourself from abuse and crime on your journey?"

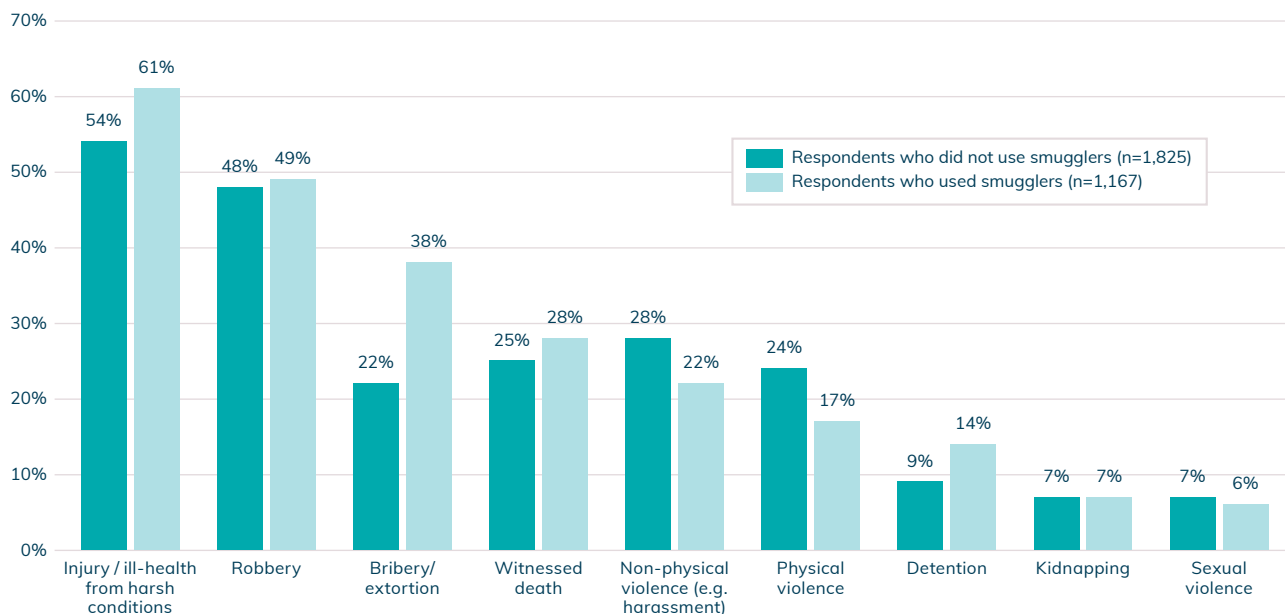


In fact, a greater proportion of respondents who used smugglers experienced or witnessed violent incidents (90%) than those who did not use smugglers (81%). And those who hired smugglers reported being victims of extortion and/or bribery to a larger extent (38%) than those who did not (22%). This discrepancy echoes a 2018 UN report that noted: “a worrying form of aggression

against smuggled migrants along the route to the north [of the Americas] is the high incidence of extortion.”³² On the other hand, respondents who did not hire smugglers experienced more episodes of physical and non-physical violence (see Figure 10) than those who did hire smugglers.

Figure 10: Prevalence of abuse along the migration route

Responses to 4Mi survey question: “Have you personally experienced any of these incidents on your journey?”



Smugglers did not influence respondents’ decisions to migrate

Nowadays, social networks play an important role in disseminating information about smugglers and the services they offer.³³ But although this digital presence may affect the specific smuggler services migrants choose to use, smugglers appear to have little direct influence on the initial decision to migrate: only six of the 3,019 respondents said smugglers had played any role in their decision to leave their place of origin, even though 45% said this decision was influenced by somebody else.

In addition, MMC has identified that, in several border areas where using smugglers is common (Venezuela-Colombia, Colombia-Peru, Colombia-Panama, Guatemala-Mexico), people on the move tend to make contact with smugglers there directly. In other words, a significant part of the population in transit seeks out smugglers long after the decision to migrate has been made and after they have begun their journey.

32 UNODC (2018) [Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants](#) (p100).

33 See: Tomasi, S. & Vicari, D. (2023) [Digital lifelines: The use of social media networks among Venezuelan refugees and migrants heading north](#). Mixed Migration Centre. | Chaparro, L. (2022). [Meta’s Latin America expansion ‘a boon to human smugglers’](#). Al Jazeera. | Dudley, S., Asmann, P. & Dittmar V. (2023) [Unintended Consequences: How US Immigration Policy Fosters Organized Crime on the US-Mexico Border](#). InSight Crime.

Conclusions

Erroneous information and misperceptions about the prevalence and dynamics of smuggler use by migrants travelling through the Americas risks diverting policy attention from areas where they are needed most by migrants, such as protection, healthcare, and basic services along the route. Moreover, placing unwarranted emphasis on migrant smuggling as a topic of concern perpetuates the stigmatisation and even criminalisation of people on the move, thereby undermining their fundamental human rights.

Effective policies require a sound evidence base. And, while the survey responses analysed in this paper are not necessarily representative of the wider population of people on the move through the Americas, several broad conclusions can be safely drawn from them:

- Although media reports and political discourse portray smugglers as key players in Latin American and Caribbean migratory movements, survey data suggests only a minority of migrants hire them to facilitate their journeys and that smuggler use declined between 2022 and 2023.
- The recruitment of smugglers by migrants increases as geographical or political restrictions at crossing borders are introduced. Previous studies have shown that restrictive policies do not reduce migratory movements, but rather diversify the means of transit and expose migrants to more dangerous situations.³⁴ One of the ways to evade these restrictions is to hire smugglers for irregular border crossings.
- Demand for smugglers' services is unlikely to wane in the absence of regular migration pathways and as long as the demand for services (such as transportation, food, hydration, lodging, etc) is not adequately met by state agencies. Smugglers often step in to meet this demand, which explains why they are primarily seen by those on the move as service providers.
- Although some smugglers commit acts of violence and abuse against migrants, they are far from being viewed as the main perpetrators of abuse along the route.

34 Forin, R. (2023) [How to break the business model of smugglers](#). Mixed Migration Centre. | Human Rights Watch (2023) ["This hell was my only option": Abuses against migrants and asylum seekers pushed to cross the Darien Gap](#) (Chapter 3).



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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