

# Service providers and sometimes criminals: Mixed perceptions of smugglers by migrants in Port Sudan

Sudan serves as a key country of transit for movements along the Central Mediterranean Route, linking countries in East and the Horn of Africa to North Africa. Since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, safe migration routes through the country have shifted away from Khartoum and migrants from conflict-affected regions are more reliant on smuggling networks to overcome limited mobility options and restrictive visa policies in neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> This snapshot examines migrants' perceptions of their smugglers, the services they provide, and the abuses that migrants perceive smugglers to be perpetrating. It should be noted that while interviews with migrants were carried out in the second half of 2024, most respondents had been in Sudan since before the outbreak of war in April 2023 and are reflecting both on their interactions with smugglers along the journey to Sudan and once in the country. This is the first of two snapshots published on smuggling dynamics along routes to and within Sudan. The second snapshot on the role of smugglers is available [here](#).

## Key findings

- Over half of migrants felt that their smugglers helped them to reach their intended destination (59%) and did not feel intentionally misled by their smugglers (56%).
- Perceptions varied by age, with youth (aged 18-24) expressing less confidence in their smugglers than older respondents (aged 25+).
- The main services supplied by smugglers were providing accommodation (45%) and food/water (46%), facilitating border crossings (33%), and dealing with authorities (32%). Youth were more reliant on smugglers for crossing borders and dealing with authorities compared to older migrants (56% and 41% vs. 25% and 29%, respectively).
- More than half of respondents (58%) described their smuggler as a "service provider or businessperson". Youth more often perceived their smugglers as criminals than older respondents (33% vs. 15-18%).

- Few migrants (9%) perceived smugglers as perpetrators of abuse during their journey. For those who did (n=28), kidnapping (18 cases), detention (16 cases), physical violence (10 cases), and robbery (7 cases) were the top abuses.

## Data and profiles

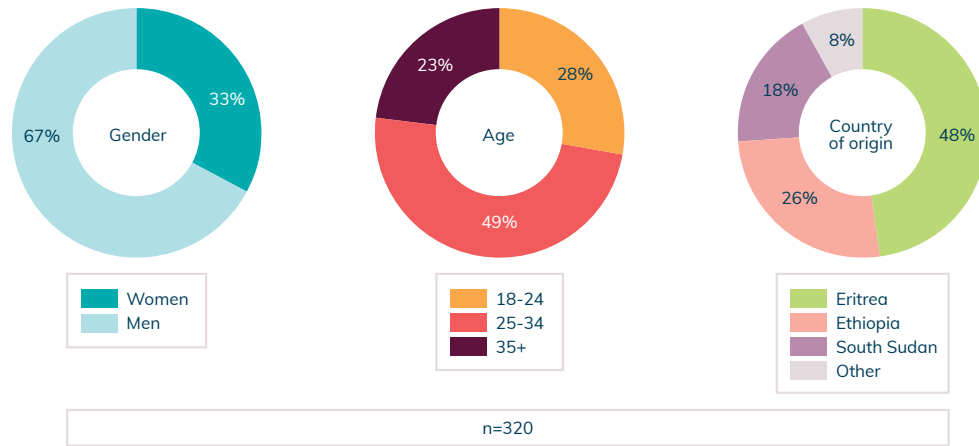
This snapshot is based on 320 phone surveys collected between June and September 2024 with migrants who were in Port Sudan and who reported using a smuggler at some point during their journey. Eritreans make up almost half of respondents (48%), followed by Ethiopians (26%), and South Sudanese (18%). UNHCR reports that these three nationalities have been most frequently displaced from Khartoum since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>2</sup> While 49% of respondents in the sample were in Port Sudan before the conflict broke out, 30% moved from Khartoum to Port Sudan, 6% from Gedaref, and 6% from Kassala, in line with displacement trends reported by UNCHR.<sup>3</sup> All respondents reported using a smuggler at some point during their journey and 42% (135 of them) did it to enter Sudan (Map 1). Almost all respondents (93%) entered Sudan before the beginning of the war, in April 2023. Some 67% of respondents are men, and almost half are adults aged 25-34 (Figure 1). Youth represent between 33% and 40% of each nationality, except for Ethiopians, of which only 7% are youth.

1 Global Initiative (October 2024). [Sudan: Conflict drives mass refugee movement and fuels human smuggling](#).

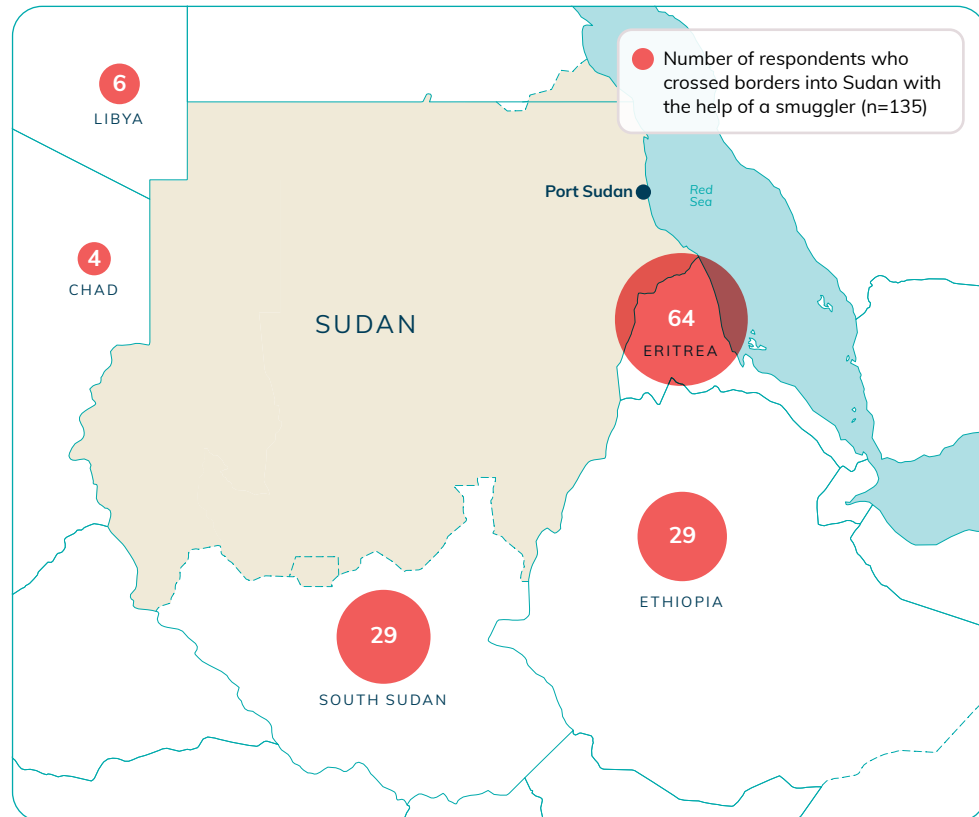
2 UNHCR (June 2024). [Protection Briefing Sudan – June 2023](#)

3 Op. cit.

**Figure 1. Overview of sample by gender, age and country of origin**



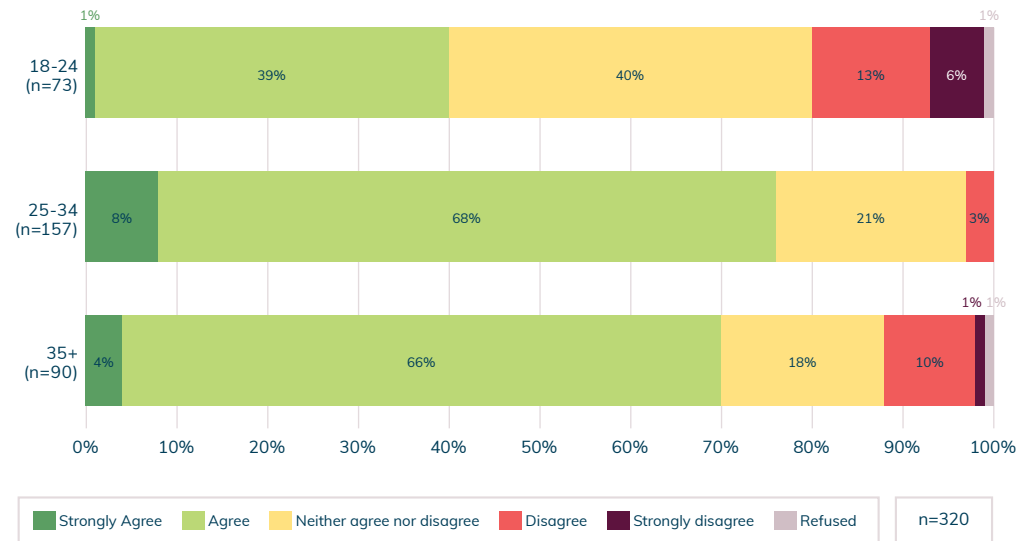
**Map 1. Borders crossed by respondents with the help of a smuggler**



## While most respondents felt their smugglers helped them reach their destinations, youth had mixed feelings

Overall, 64% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that smugglers helped them to achieve their migration goals. Perceptions varied considerably by age, with 39% of youth agreeing, compared to 68% of those aged 25-34 and 66% those 35+ (Figure 2). In addition, youth seemed to have a more neutral view of whether their smugglers helped them, which may suggest that they used smugglers differently or had more exploitive arrangements than older migrants.

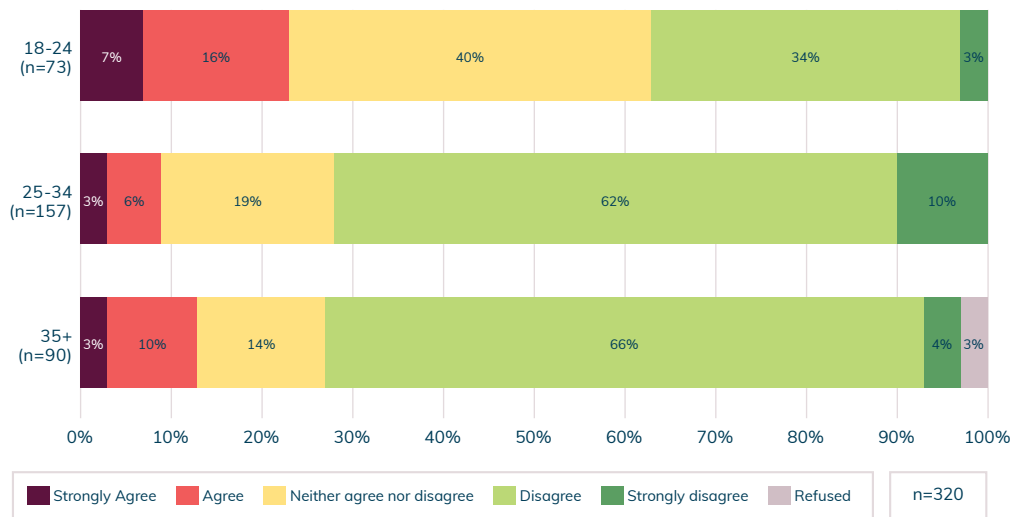
**Figure 2. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The smuggler or smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country" by age groups**



## While most respondents did not feel intentionally misled by their smugglers, once again youth had mixed feelings

More than half of respondents (56%) disagreed that they were intentionally misled by smugglers, while 13% agreed, suggesting that smugglers are mainly perceived by respondents as relatively reliable. Younger respondents were less confident in asserting that smugglers did not mislead them: 16% of youth felt misled, compared to 6% of 25-34-year-olds, and 40% of youth were neutral, compared to 19% of 25-34-year-olds (Figure 3). This lends further evidence to the notion that youth respondents used smugglers differently or had more exploitive arrangements. Existing research points to younger people being more vulnerable to forced or precarious work arrangements with their smugglers to pay for their journeys. Indeed, when examining whether respondents worked in the 12 months prior to starting their journeys, 85% of youth said they were not making any money, as compared to 29% of respondents aged 25 years and older, suggesting that youth were in more financially insecure situations.

**Figure 3. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers" by age groups**

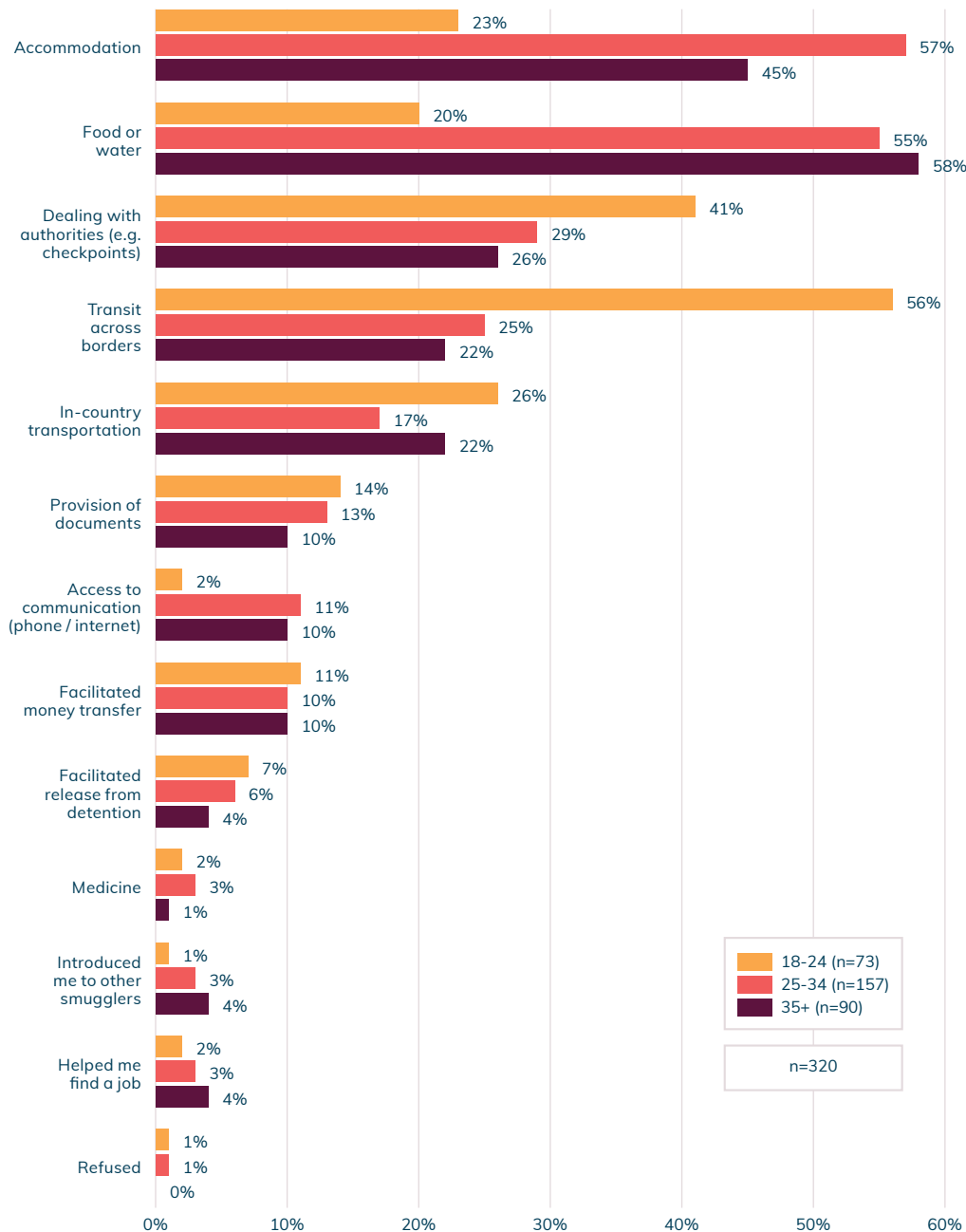


## Services provided by smugglers were diverse and varied considerably by age

Accommodation (45%), food or water (46%), transit across borders (33%), dealing with authorities (32%), and in-country transportation (20%) were the top services provided by smugglers among all respondents. This supports the notion of smugglers being described by migrants as service providers as mentioned below (Figure 5). Youth relied more heavily on smugglers for crossing borders and dealing with authorities compared to older adults (56% and 41% vs. 25% and 29%, respectively) (Figure 4). Similarly, fewer youth than adults aged 25-34 reported receiving accommodation (23% vs. 57%) and food/water (20% vs. 55%) from their smugglers.

In line with previous findings, younger respondents seem to use smugglers differently from people in older age groups. The financial profile of respondents may have shaped the different services they received: 62% of youth did not have an income in the 12 months before travelling, whereas 97% of 25-34-year-olds and 61% of 35(+)-year-olds reported having one. This suggests that youth respondents had fewer financial resources and may have prioritized spending on essential migration services, such as crossing the border.

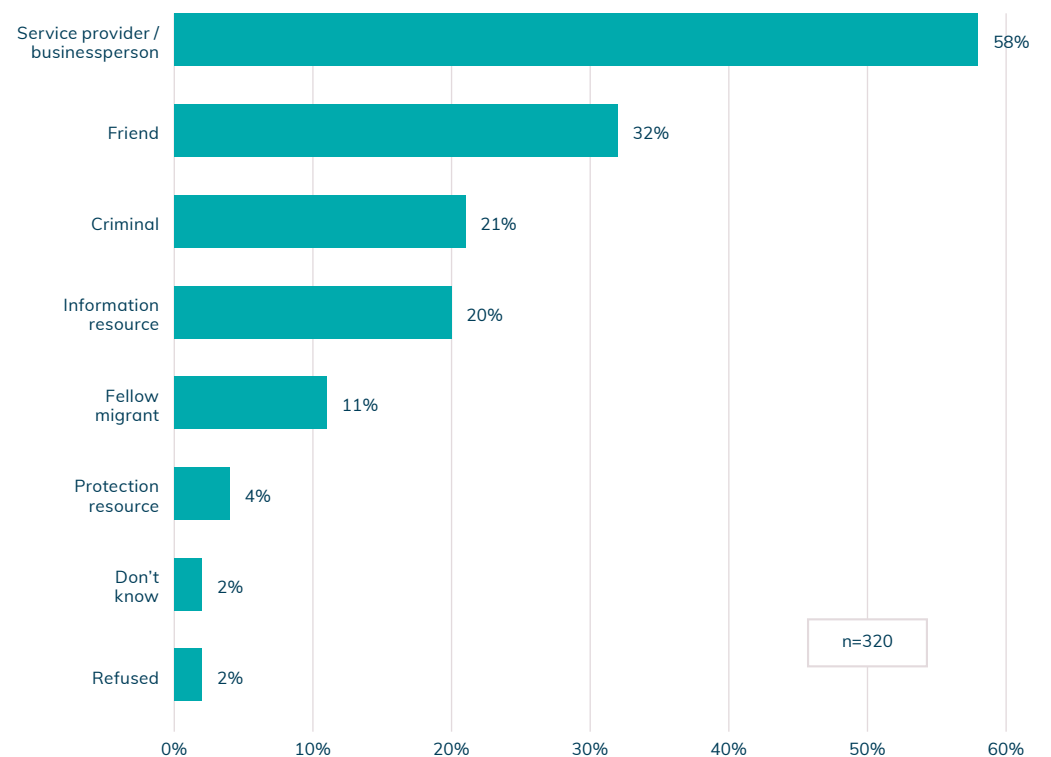
**Figure 4. “What did the smuggler provide you with?” by age groups**



## Most respondents saw smugglers as service providers, but a large minority saw them as criminals

58% of respondents described their smugglers as service providers or businesspeople, while 32% saw them as friends, 21% as criminals, and 11% viewed them as fellow migrants (Figure 5). Youth more often perceived smugglers as criminals (33%) than adults aged 24-25 (18%) or 35+ (15%). What can appear as contradictory may instead reflect the complexity of migrants-smuggler relationships: while migrants may consider smugglers to be instrumental and reliable service providers for migration, their trust may be tempered by their awareness of the risks involved, law-breaking activities carried out by smugglers, and the abuses and/or exploitation that some face at the hands of their smugglers.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 5. “How would you describe your smuggler or smugglers?”**

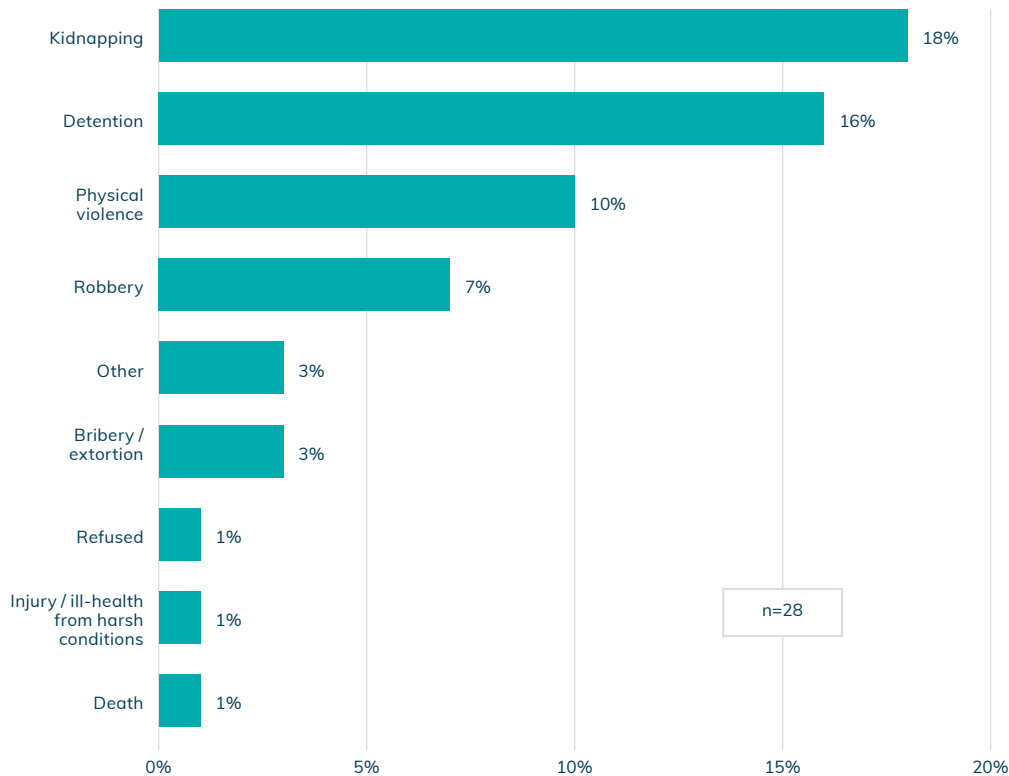


<sup>4</sup> Danish Institute for International Studies (February 2021). [“Does information save migrants’ lives? Knowledge of needs of West African migrants en route to Europe.”](#)

## Few respondents reported smugglers as perpetrators of abuse; top abuses were detention, robbery, physical violence, and kidnapping

Overall, 28 respondents (13%) cited smugglers as likely perpetrators of abuse in dangerous locations along the journey. More often respondents cited armed groups/militias (28%), military/policy (25%), and people from the local community (19%). The top abuses linked to smugglers were kidnapping, detention, physical violence, and robbery (Figure 6). Sexual violence was more frequently reported by women (29%) than men (6%), while men reported higher rates of detention (60% of men vs. 46% of women), robbery (40% vs. 37%), kidnapping (33% vs. 29%), physical violence (33% vs. 25%), and death (22% vs. 15%). In terms of age, youth respondents more often linked smugglers to kidnapping than older age groups. That said, given the small size of this sub sample, results should be treated with caution.

**Figure 6. Abuses and harms linked to smugglers in dangerous locations along the journey**



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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 East and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

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](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)