



Front cover photo credit:

Rami Ibrahim / ©IOM Yemen.

2022, Lahj Governorate. After taking a perilous boat journey across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen's shores, Ethiopian migrants walk for days along the coast to reach Aden or other major transit hubs.

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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). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

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Summary and key findings

The Eastern Route is widely regarded as among the most dangerous mixed migration routes originating from the African continent, in terms of migrants' exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation.¹ This report, based on 346 surveys with migrants in Lahj, Yemen and 16 with smugglers in Ethiopia, focuses on the nature and dynamics of human smuggling along this route between locations of origin in Ethiopia and points of arrival along the coast of Lahj Governorate in Yemen. It examines the role of smugglers, the services they offer, the financial aspects of the journey, and how migrants perceive their smugglers. Additionally, the report delves into the abuses associated with smugglers, migrants' protection strategies, and the forms of assistance that migrants receive from smugglers. This study was carried out against the backdrop of reduction in recorded migrant arrivals in Yemen, not merely because of the joint military campaign in the Red Sea and anti-smuggling campaigns by Yemeni and Djiboutian coastguards since August 2023,² but also owing to decreased access to data collection in key transit locations along this route.³ The data provide some insight into these dynamics, which is critical to informing the work of humanitarian actors and policymakers, and fundamental for developing interventions that address the vulnerabilities of migrants along this precarious route.

The key findings include:

- Smugglers played a limited role in influencing respondents' migration decisions (9%) and route selection (11%) between Ethiopia and coastal departure points in Djibouti or Somalia. Indeed, more than half of the respondents (57%) stated that they were not influenced by anyone in their decision to migrate, indicating that their choice was largely self-motivated rather than driven by persuasion.
- Far from being coerced into using smugglers, migrants reported hiring smugglers to make the journey easier (75%) and cheaper (45%), and they were often proactive in initiating contact (85%) themselves.
- The vast majority of respondents (95%) employed the services of one smuggler on their journey to Lahj, Yemen. Of these, most (62%) employed them for one part of the journey—likely for the Red Sea crossing.
- In contrast to 4Mi data from the Central Mediterranean Route or the Southern Route (towards South Africa), showing smugglers provide a range of services to migrants,⁴ the primary service provided by smugglers along this section of the Eastern Route was arranging transit across borders (99%).
- On average, 97% of the respondents paid around 300 USD to the smuggler for their services, largely for the sea crossing. With an average of 100,000 migrants crossing annually, this would amount to a smuggling business worth 30 million USD annually, a significant source of income for smugglers operating out of Djibouti.
- Over half of surveyed migrants (60%) paid their smuggler in full before starting the journey, which, according to past MMC research, can be a driver of vulnerability,⁵ as migrants deplete their resources at the start of the journey and fall victim to smugglers extracting further compensation.
- Despite actively seeking to employ smugglers and reporting that smugglers helped them to achieve their migration goal (99%), strikingly, all migrants felt that smugglers intentionally misled them. This finding stands out for its stark contrast with other migration routes, which portray a more mixed picture of misinformation, underscoring the unique and exploitive dynamics of the Eastern Route.
- Smugglers were rarely trusted (2%) by migrants as reliable sources of information; with this in mind, few respondents used smugglers as information sources before (12%) and during the journey (28%).
- 72% perceived smugglers as perpetrators of abuse in dangerous locations along the route, identifying physical violence (82%), death (68%), and robbery (58%) as the top dangers.
- While smugglers were rarely regarded as trustworthy and were seen as perpetrators of abuse, only 22% of surveyed migrants viewed them as criminals. Indeed, most perceived their smugglers as service providers (64%), highlighting an inherent complexity in migrant-smuggler relationships. The same complexity can be seen in migrants' strategies for keeping safe along the route: 18% cited hiring smugglers while 1% cited avoiding them to reduce the risk of abuse and crime.

1 Ravenstone Consult (2023). [Captive commodities: "This route is like a fire"](#)

2 IOM DTM (2023). [Yemen – Quarterly Migration Overview October-December 2023](#); IOM DTM (2024). [IOM DTM \(2024\). Yemen – Flow-Monitoring Registry | Non-Yemeni Migrant Arrivals and Yemeni Migrant Returnees in April 2024](#)

3 IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(September 2024\)](#); IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(August 2024\)](#)

4 MMC (n.d.). [4Mi Interactive](#); MMC (2024). [Human rights in the context of smuggling: Perceptions and experiences of migrants in Mali and Niger](#); MMC & UNHCR (2021). [A Roadmap for Advocacy, Policy Development, and Programming: Protection in Mixed Movements along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes 2021](#)

5 MMC (2020). [A Sharper Lens on Vulnerability \(North Africa\): A statistical analysis of the determinants of vulnerability to protection incidents among refugees and migrants in Libya](#); MMC (2019). [What makes refugees and migrants vulnerable to detention in Libya?](#)

Introduction

Each year, tens of thousands of migrants, mainly Ethiopians, travel along the Eastern Route from the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea and through Yemen to find work in key destinations such as Saudi Arabia and other countries on the Arabian Peninsula.⁶ In 2023, around 97,000 migrants arrived in Yemen by travelling along this migration route, outpacing both the Central Mediterranean Route and Southern Route.⁷ Despite Yemen's protracted civil war since 2014, followed by economic decline and the collapse of public institutions,⁸ it remains a key transit country for large-scale mixed migration, with an average of approximately 100,000 people migrating from the Horn of Africa to and through Yemen every year for more than a decade.

In addition to being the most travelled African migration route, the Eastern Route is widely considered as the most dangerous, as migrants encounter life-threatening situations and are exposed to violence, abuse, and exploitation.⁹ This includes severe risks of abuse and killings at the Saudi-Yemen border.¹⁰ According to the IOM Missing Migrants Project, more than 1,300 migrants have died due to drowning on the Eastern Route in the last decade,¹¹ with approximately 400 recorded in 2024, marking it as the deadliest year on record.¹²

The Eastern Route, particularly the Red Sea crossing, is predominantly controlled by migrant smuggling and trafficking networks, distinguishing it from other migration routes where such networks may not exert as much influence and control over irregular migration. Existing research has linked this to Yemen's conflict and deteriorating security situation, which have led to a governance vacuum, creating an ideal environment for smuggling and trafficking networks to flourish.¹³

While much research has been carried out on the scope and nature of human smuggling at the qualitative level, there remains a persistent gap in larger-scale quantitative data on smuggling in Yemen¹⁴ and the scale of exploitative practices by smuggling networks along the route.¹⁵ These gaps stem from the significant challenges in collecting data in Yemen, largely due to the difficulties faced in obtaining research authorisation and the lack of safety and security presented by ongoing conflict, creating access constraints to researchers.¹⁶

This report seeks to contribute to the quantitative evidence base on the role and modus operandi of smugglers as well as migrants' experiences with smugglers along this segment of the Eastern Route. It examines the services they provide, payment modalities, migrants' perceptions of smugglers, the protection incidents along the route where smugglers are identified as possible perpetrators, and the strategies undertaken by migrants to protect themselves along their route to Yemen.

6 IOM (2024). [DTM Yemen - Annual Migration Report \(2023\)](#)

7 IOM (2024). *Ibid.*

8 UN Yemen (n.d.). [United Nations in Yemen](#)

9 MRP (n.d.). [Where is the Eastern Route?](#)

10 MMC (2024). [Indifference and impunity: 10 months on, Saudi border killings of migrants continue](#)

11 IOM (n.d.). [Missing Migrants Project](#)

12 IOM (2024). [IOM News](#)

13 U.S. Department of State (2024). [2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Yemen](#); CMS (2020). [Caught in the Crossfire: Challenges to Migrant Protection in the Yemeni and Libyan Conflicts](#)

14 HRW (2014). [Yemen's Torture Camps](#)

15 INTERSOS (2024). [The vulnerabilities of the migrant population in Yemen](#)

16 SANA'A (2021). [The Myth of Data in Yemen](#); RMMS (2017). [Yemen Country Statement](#)

Background

The Eastern Route runs from the Horn of Africa – primarily Ethiopia – across the Red Sea and through Yemen to reach key labour destinations in Saudi Arabia and other countries on the Arabian Peninsula. The coastal cities of Obock in Djibouti and Bossaso in Somalia serve as the main points of departure for sea crossings. Migrants typically arrive in Yemen's Lahj Governorate if departing from Djibouti, and Shabwah Governorate if departing from Somalia. Overall, the crossing from Djibouti is considerably shorter than from Somalia. The route is built on strong historical ties between Muslim communities in Ethiopia and the Gulf, later expanding through religious pilgrimages, trade, work, and education opportunities.¹⁷ Beyond historical and economic ties, the route was also central to the regional slave trading networks continuing through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁸

Figure 1. Eastern Route from Djibouti and Somalia to Yemen



Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC.

2024 has seen an unprecedented drop in recorded arrivals to Yemen, representing an 83% decrease from 92,357 between January and September 2023 to 15,933 during the same period in 2024.¹⁹ This marks the sharpest decline in the number of recorded migrant crossings from the Horn to Yemen in more than a decade, except for the COVID-19 years (Figure 2). The reduction in recorded arrivals to Yemen and marked decrease in recorded departures from Djibouti since August 2023 might lead to the assumption that Yemeni and Djiboutian counter-smuggling campaigns have curbed the movement of people along the Eastern Route.²⁰ However, a closer look suggests these numbers likely reflect an increasing challenge with access to migrants due to operational constraints at key arrival points on the Yemeni west coast—locations where IOM have until recently been monitoring movements – and a simultaneous

17 RMMS (2017). [Yemen Country Statement](#) and Majid, N. & Abdurahman, K. (2019). [Mobility, Trust and Exchange: Somalia and Yemen's Cross-border Maritime Economy](#)

18 XCEPT (2020). [Bossaso and the Gulf of Aden: Changing Dynamics of a Land-Sea Network.](#); Serels, S. (2019). [The Persistence of Slavery in the Southern Red Sea Region in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries](#)

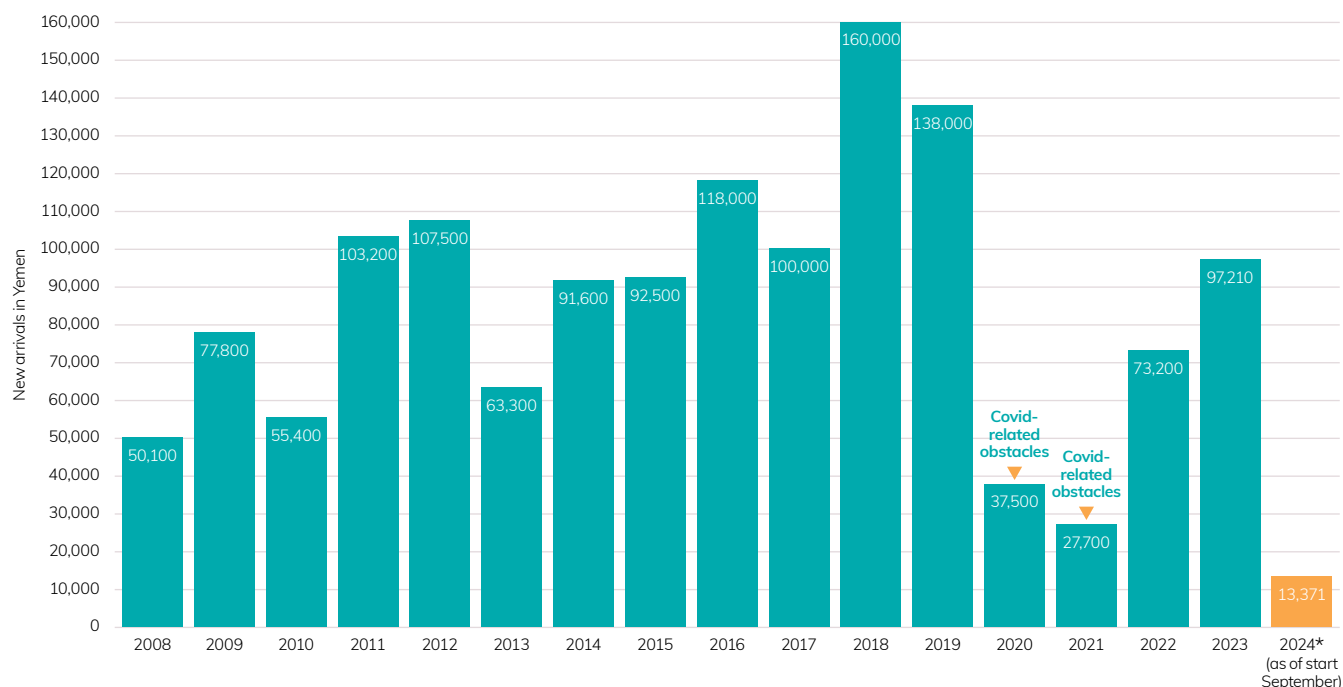
19 IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(September 2024\)](#); IOM (2023). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(September 2023\)](#)

20 IOM (2024). [Flow Monitoring Registry Dashboard \(August 2024\)](#); IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(May 2024\)](#)

shift in coastal arrival points from Lahj to Ta'iz to evade the coastguard.²¹ At the same time, the number of migrants arriving in Djibouti has continued as movements out of Ethiopia have not ceased.²² In short, although hard to confirm, most likely there has been no reduction in actual crossings from the Horn of Africa to Yemen, but rather a situation of under-reporting due to access constraints.

Figure 2. Sixteen-year summary of movement of migrants and refugees to Yemen from mainland Africa

Illustrating the consistently high level of movement other than in exceptional years (Covid and 2024)



Credit: A variety of UNHCR, IOM and MPI sources.

*Due to access constraints and limited arrivals monitoring the figures for 2024 are not representative and are likely to be a very large under-estimation of arrivals.

This background sets the stage for a more detailed analysis of the smuggling dynamics along the Eastern Route to Lahj, Yemen. A possible shift in arrival points on the Yemeni coast raises questions about the impact on smuggling dynamics and how migrants navigate their way through one of the most dangerous routes in the world.

21 IOM (2024). *Ibid.*

22 IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(July 2024\)](#)

Methodology

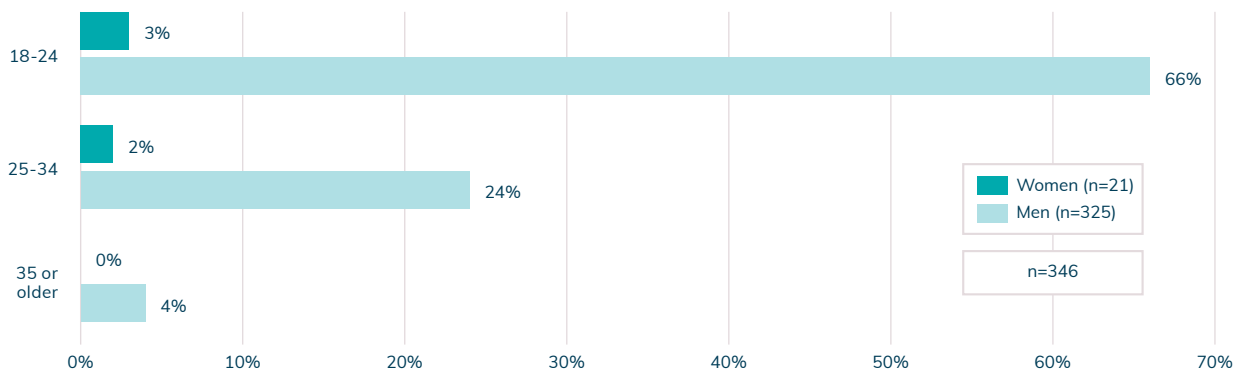
This report draws upon 346 surveys conducted in Lahj, Yemen between August and September 2024 with newly arriving Ethiopians. Respondents were identified through a non-probability sampling approach, by targeting those who used a smuggler and were adults (18 and older) at the time of the interview. This study focuses on Ethiopians because they constitute the largest group on the move along the Eastern Route (95%).²³ Given the limited sample size, including other nationalities such as Somalis (5%) or Djiboutians (<1%)²⁴ in alignment with their proportion in wider statistics would restrict the ability to disaggregate the data by key factors of interest.

This report also draws on a limited number of structured surveys (16 in total) with smugglers, key informant interviews, and secondary data resources to verify and complement findings emerging from the surveys collected in Yemen. Due to authorization constraints, smugglers in Yemen could not be accessed, so the interviews were conducted with smugglers in Ethiopia. However, as part of the inclusion criteria, these smugglers confirmed their involvement in networks operating along the Eastern Route.

Profiles

The vast majority of respondents in the sample are men (94%), while women constitute 6%. Studies reveal that identifying migrant women arriving in Yemen is particularly challenging, not only due to their lower numbers compared to men, but also because they are a hard-to-reach population as their migration may be associated with abduction and trafficking in persons.²⁵ Observations from a 2014 MMC study suggest that a considerable number of women are abducted upon arrival in Yemen,²⁶ and a 2024 IOM DTM study similarly found women taken without their consent upon arrival.²⁷ In addition, many (if not most) women traveling along this route undertake their journeys by air, to engage in authorised domestic work organised by recruitment agencies.²⁸ In terms of age distribution, most respondents were youth between 18 and 24 years old (see Figure 3). No one travelled with children (under 18) under their care.

Figure 3. Respondents by age and gender distribution



23 IOM (2024). [DTM Yemen - Annual Migration Report \(2023\)](#)

24 IOM (2024). *Ibid.*

25 IOM (2024). [Regional Migrant Response Plan 2024](#)

26 RMMS (2014). [Abused & Abducted - The plight of female migrants from the Horn of Africa in Yemen](#)

27 IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(July 2024\)](#)

28 ILO (2016). [Promoting and protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers in transit: The case of Ethiopian women migrants](#)

Limitations

This study has three main limitations:

- The survey employs purposive and snowball sampling. Combined with the fact that migrants strive to stay 'below the radar' because of their unauthorised status,²⁹ respondents are not representative of all Ethiopians engaged in mixed migration along the Eastern Route.
- The analysis is drawn from a largely homogenous sample in a single geographic area: men (94%), all of whom are Ethiopian, surveyed in Lahj Governorate. The findings do not capture the experiences of minority groups on the move, or women and individuals from other countries of origin, or dynamics in other governorates of Yemen.
- Lastly, based on the relatively limited sample size of migrants (n=346) and smugglers (n=16), the results of the descriptive analysis should be treated with caution. In many ways, this research was a pilot for MMC in Yemen and future research should aim to significantly expand data collection to target multiple locations of arrival and transit in Yemen, and to increase the representation of women and other nationalities.

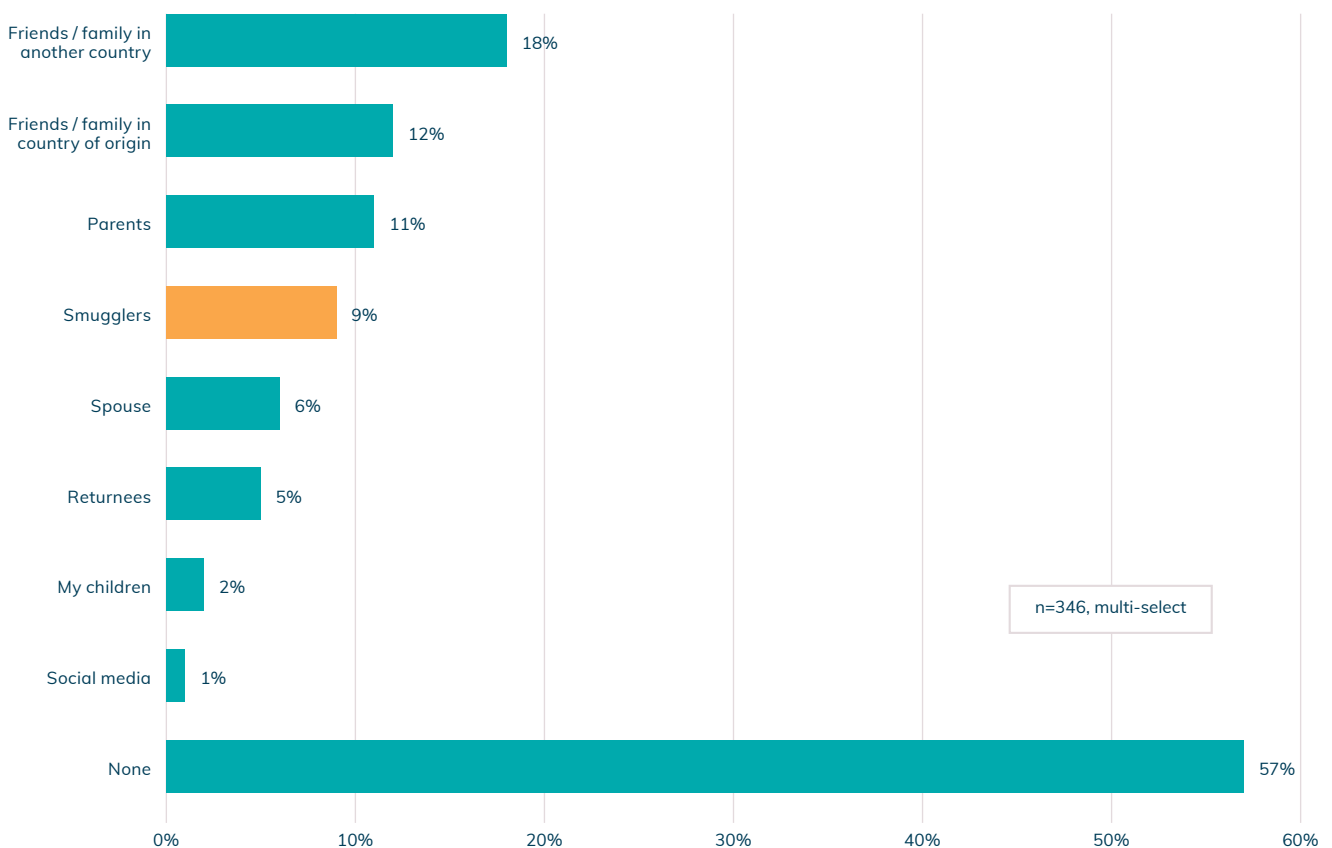
29 RMMS (2013). [Migrant Smuggling in the Horn of Africa and Yemen](#)

Findings

Smuggler influence on the migration process

Smugglers did not feature among the top influences on the decision to migrate, with 9% of respondents citing smugglers. This figure aligns with the data collected by MMC across eastern and southern Africa (5% of 14,323 surveys), underscoring limited smuggler influence.³⁰ The majority (57%) of respondents in this study cited not being influenced by anyone or anything on their decision to migrate, highlighting that their choices were largely self-motivated. For those who did report an external influence, friends and family in another country (18%) and in the country of origin (12%) were the top two (Figure 4). A 2022 IOM study explains the influence of friends and family in sparking migration aspirations through the role of economic and social remittances to Ethiopia. The impact of monetary remittances and success stories shared via social networks has a strong effect and appears to override dangers along the route.³¹ **This evidence further supports the notion that public and policy discourse exaggerate smugglers' influence in encouraging irregular migration.**³²

Figure 4. Biggest influences on the decision to migrate



30 MMC (2024). [Mixed Migration Review 2024](#)

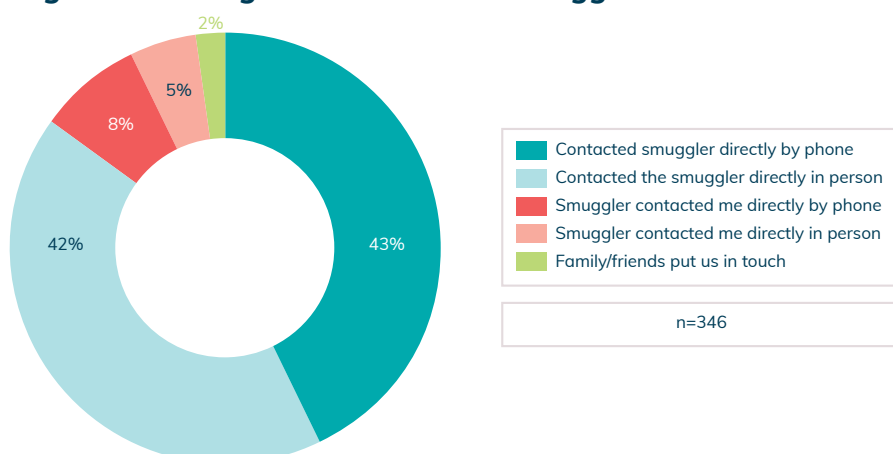
31 IOM (2022). [The role of Economic and Social Remittances in Shaping Migration Flows from Ethiopia](#)

32 MMC (2021). [Smuggling and mixed migration - Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection](#)

Making contact with smugglers

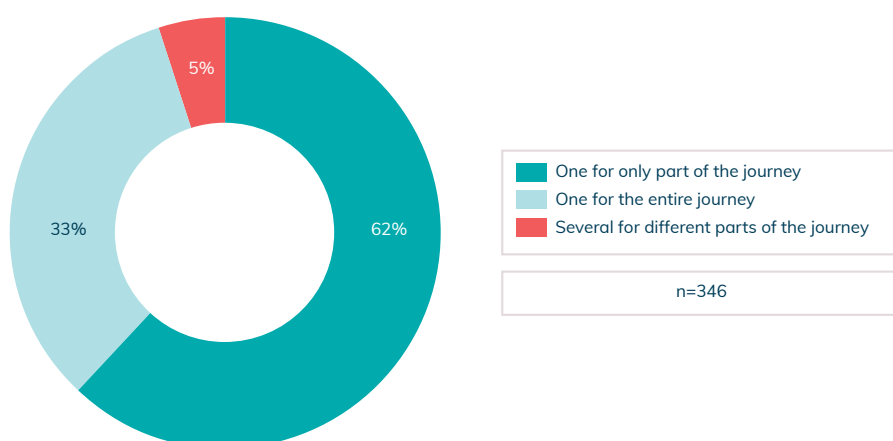
Most respondents (85%) initiated contact with the smuggler themselves directly by phone (43%) and in person (42%), rather than the smuggler approaching them (13%) (Figure 5). Similarly, the majority of smugglers (14 out of 16) also reported that migrants approached them directly. The primary means of communication cited by all smugglers were mobile phones, followed by face-to-face interactions. **Surveyed migrants can therefore be described as active agents of their migration journeys, proactively engaging smugglers** whom they view as a strategic means to achieve their goal of migrating to another country. This finding **contrasts with narratives that depict smugglers as actively recruiting and coercing migrants into using their services**, at least at the start of their migration journeys.

Figure 5. Making contact with the smuggler



The vast majority of respondents (95%) secured the services of a single smuggler on their journey to Yemen (Figure 6). This includes 62% who engaged a smuggler for one part of the journey and 33% who used a smuggler for the entire route.³³ For most respondents who used a smuggler for part of the journey, it is likely that they navigated the segments of the route within the Horn of Africa independently, and then engaged a smugglers to cross the Red Sea, given smugglers' control over all sea vessels.³⁴ Hence, the picture that emerges is one in which **more than half of migrants are making the land journey themselves up until they reach coastal areas, when they require the services of a smuggler to cross**.

Figure 6. Use of smuggler



Of the 17 (5%) respondents who engaged more than one smuggler, 12 mentioned that they met each smuggler independently, signifying that their smugglers were not part of highly organised networks. Instead, **smugglers appeared to be separate agents fulfilling distinct functions**, or what the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform

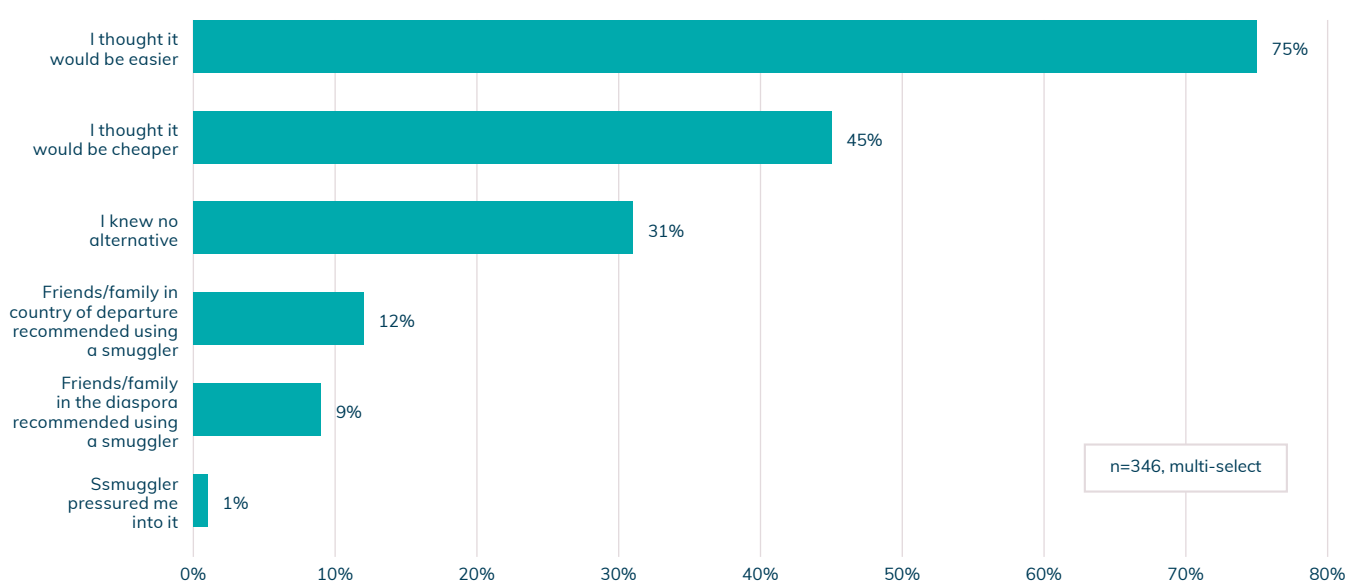
33 Given proactive sampling to include people who used smugglers, this should not be interpreted as reflecting the overall proportion of people using smugglers travelling along the Eastern Route.

34 Ravenstone Consult (2023). [Captive commodities: "This route is like a fire"](#)

describes as “opportunistic individuals” carrying out simple operations as opposed to criminal groups conducting complex ventures.³⁵ This stands in sharp contrast to the more organized crime networks linked to trafficking in persons along the Eastern Route.³⁶

Migrants stated that they used a smuggler to make the journey easier (75%) and cheaper (45%), which aligns with their practical reasons for their route choice. Nearly a third (31%) of respondents felt they had no other option, which underscores the gap in safe and legal migration pathways along this route as well as smugglers’ control over the sea crossing. **Rarely (1%) did respondents say that they were pressured into using a smuggler, indicating low levels of smuggler coercion** (Figure 7). This finding shows that, at least among the respondents of this study, the smuggling dynamics observed did not start off as ‘aggravated smuggling’³⁷ or trafficking. It should be emphasized that this figure is not representative of the wider experiences of migrants transiting Yemen, as victims of trafficking networks were likely not visible or accessible to enumerators in Lahj. Moreover, it is possible that aggravated smuggling or trafficking dynamics more often start after migrants arrive in Yemen, as they become more vulnerable to falling prey to criminal gangs and armed groups as they attempt to transit conflict-affected areas of Yemen.³⁸

Figure 7. Rationale for the use of smuggler services



35 ICCLR (2020). [Migrant Smuggling Patterns and Challenges for Law Enforcement](#)

36 Ravenstone Consult (2023). *Ibid.*

37 ‘Aggravated smuggling’ is defined by article 6 (3) of the [UNODC Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants](#) as acts ‘(a) That endanger, or are likely to endanger, the lives or safety of the migrants concerned; or (b) That entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants.’

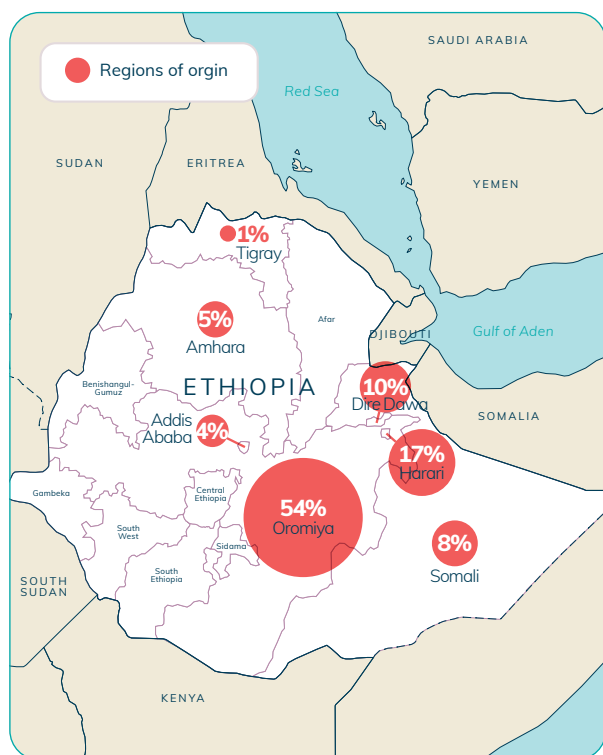
38 Ravenstone Consult (2023). *Ibid.*

Route

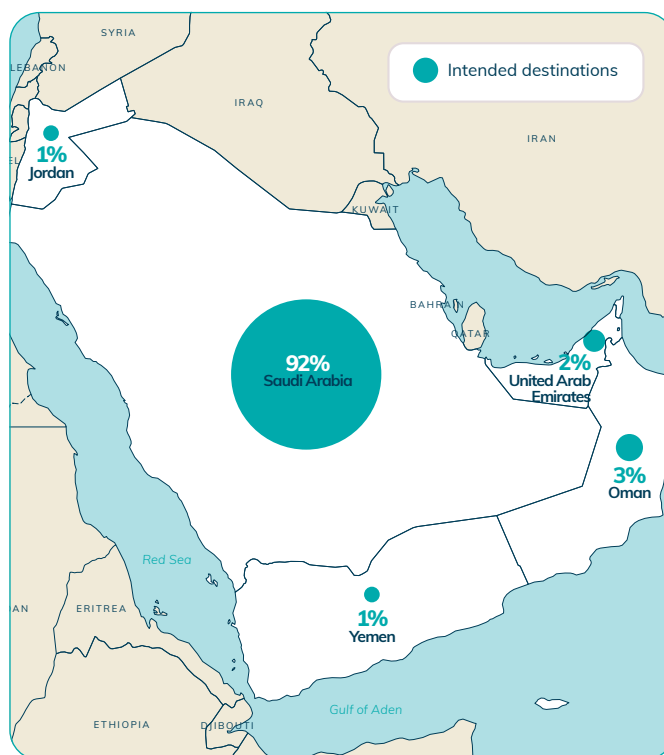
Among the surveyed respondents, 54% were from Oromia, 17% from Harari, 10% from Dire Dawa, and 8% from the Somali Region, with the remaining 11% spread across various other regions in Ethiopia. **The majority (99%) had not reached their destination at the time of the interview in Lahj, suggesting that respondents will continue to rely on smugglers to complete their journeys** farther afield in the Arabian Peninsula. The top countries of preferred destinations (Figure 8) were Saudi Arabia (92%), Oman (3%), the United Arab Emirates (2%), and Jordan (1%).

Figure 8. Respondents' regions of origin and intended destinations

Regions of origin



Intended destinations

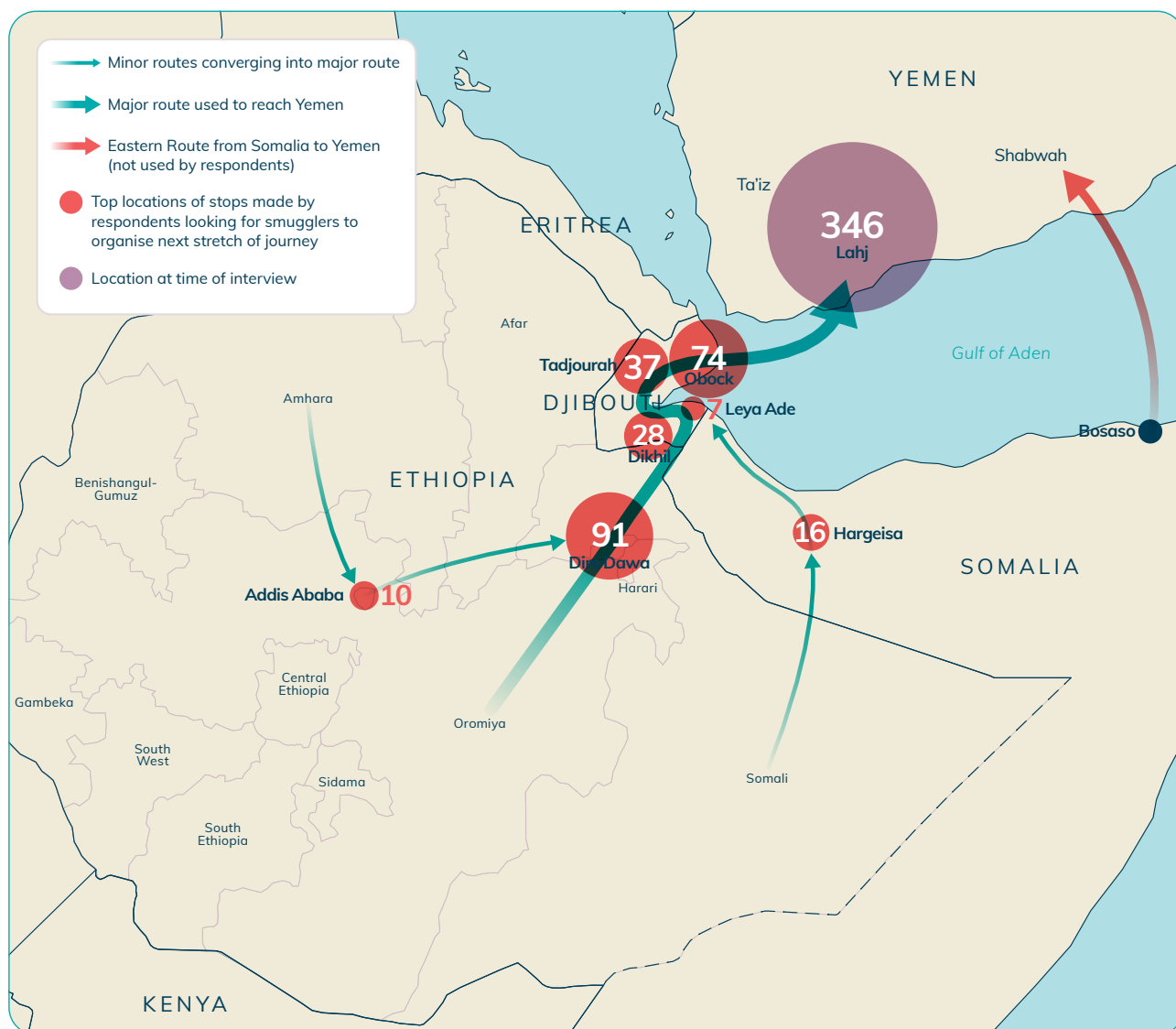


Disclaimer: These maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC.

Along the route, migrants stopped at different locations, primarily Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia; Obock, Tadjourah, Dikhil, and Loya Ade in Djibouti; and Hargeisa in Somalia (Figure 9). The main reasons for stopping in these locations included, among others, waiting for money transfers from family and friends to pay for the next stretch of the journey (88%), waiting for transport (86%), and stopping to look for smugglers³⁹ (81%). In this way, **most migrants do not appear to be using smugglers from the start of their journeys in their communities of origin. Instead, they are connecting with smugglers in major cities and transit hubs and in coastal areas.**

³⁹ Enumerators use locally relevant terms such as broker, recruiter, agent, and trafficker when referring to the smuggler in their interactions with respondents. In practice, the differentiating line between smuggling and trafficking can often appear blurred, as smuggling dynamics may evolve into trafficking. MMC's broader 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 international checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation and accommodation.

Figure 9. Route taken by respondents to reach Yemen and smuggler engagement along the journey



Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by MMC.

Nearly all respondents (99%) embarked on the Red Sea crossing from Djibouti. The primary departure point respondents used to cross the Red Sea was Obock, whereas 1% departed from Bossaso (Somalia). A few respondents (6%) originating from the Somali Region made an initial stop in Hargeisa and, rather than departing from Bossaso or Bari Region in Somalia, proceeded to Djibouti to depart from Obock. This is noteworthy because since August 2023, IOM data suggest that migrant departures from Djibouti, particularly from Obock to Lahj, have been nearly absent, and that the route through Somalia has primarily been used by migrants to reach Yemen.^{40, 41} The findings from this study suggest that **the Djibouti-Yemen route remains active despite anti-smuggling campaigns and despite operational constraints to collect data to accurately capture arrivals.** Since MMC was not able to collect surveys in Ta'iz and Shabwah Governorates for this study, it is difficult to determine whether a shift in arrival points at the Yemeni west coast has taken place.

40 IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(August 2024\)](#); IOM (2024). [Flow Monitoring Registry Dashboard \(August 2024\)](#); IOM (2024). [Migration Along the Eastern Corridor \(July 2024\)](#)

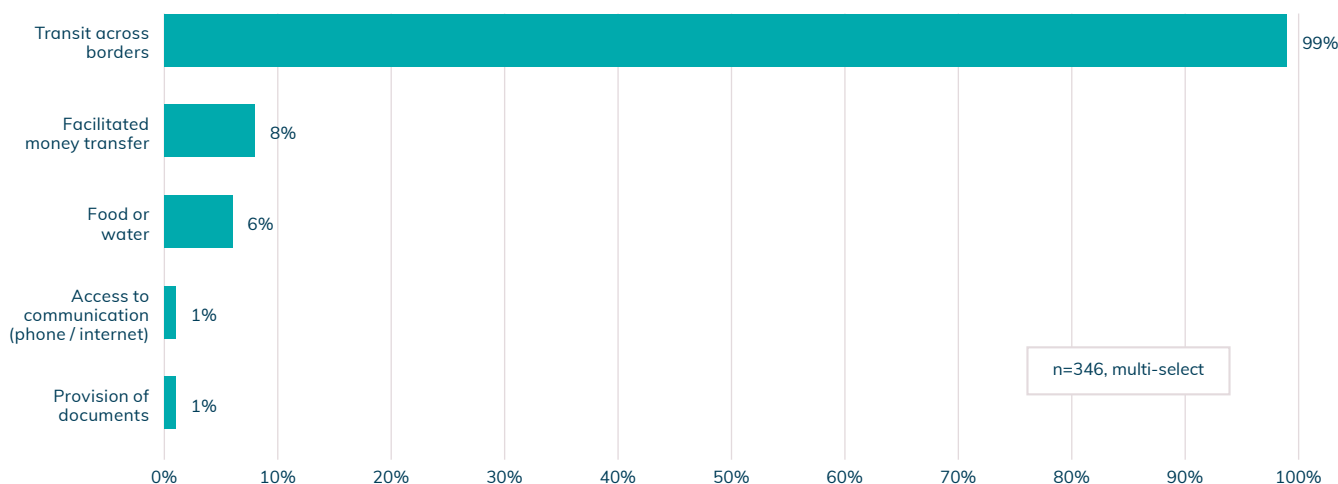
41 However, 93% of respondents interviewed by MMC in Lahj cited arriving from August-September 2024. IOM not only reported no migrant arrivals in Lahj, where DTM teams were present, but also no departures from Djibouti, based on their presence in Lahj and Shabwah Governorates. With IOM gaining access to the coast of Ta'iz Governorate in September 2024, migrant arrivals are once again being recorded and are believed to have shifted there from the Lahj coast. This is reflected in IOM data, which shows a 65% increase in arrivals in September and a 136% increase in October, with a significant rise in migrants departing from Djibouti.

In exploring why respondents chose the route through Djibouti to Yemen, 72% stated it was the cheapest, 51% cited it as the shortest option, and 50% selected it for being the fastest. **Smugglers (11%) played a marginal role in influencing the choice of route, supporting the notion that smugglers largely provide a sea crossing service**, rather than direct respondents' migration journeys. Overall, the data indicate that sea patrols have done little to impact the cost of migration or routes through the sea. Moreover, **the goal of reaching Arabian Peninsula appears to outweigh the many well-known risks** including shipwrecks, drowning at sea, exploitation, or abuse, among others.

Smuggler services

Nearly all (99%) respondents used smugglers to move across borders, largely for crossing the Red Sea. In this way, migrants recruited smugglers along more restrictive or controlled segments of the journey. Where legal channels to migrate are unavailable, smugglers are often the only source of transportation services, thus playing a crucial role in shaping the dynamics along the Eastern Route.⁴² Indeed, most (11 out of 16) of the interviewed smugglers also mentioned providing transportation across borders as the top service they offer to migrants along this route. Migrants' use of smugglers for other services (Figure 10) was limited, with 8% citing their smugglers facilitated money transfers and provided food and water (6%). A UNODC study revealed that money transfers are carried out through the *Hawala* system,⁴³ as it is accessible and operates well in the absence of available financial systems.⁴⁴ The **overall data on smuggler services along the Eastern Route contrasts with data collected along other mixed migration routes in Africa where smugglers are typically used for a wider range of services, beyond border crossings.**⁴⁵ This is likely because respondents were interviewed shortly after their arrival in Lahj, Yemen. As previously indicated, 62% primarily relied on smugglers for only one part of their journey, most likely the Red Sea crossing.

Figure 10. Services provided by the smuggler



In addition to providing the aforementioned services, smugglers were also sources of information to migrants before the start of their journey (12%) and more so along the route (28%) (Figure 11). That said, **smugglers were by no means migrants' main sources of information during the journey, contrary to findings along other African migration routes.**⁴⁶ Instead, friends and family in another country (75% before travel, 74% during travel) and in the country of origin (41% before travel, 34% during travel) were migrants' primary sources of information about the journey along the Eastern Route. This aligns with the finding that friends and family were also the biggest influence in the respondents' decision to migrate, and that smugglers played a marginal role. Existing research underscores Ethiopians' heavy reliance on personal connections for information to plan their journeys.⁴⁷

42 IOM (2020). [Comparative Eastern Corridor Route Analysis: Obock, Djibouti and Bosaso, Puntland](#)

43 "Hawala is an informal method of transferring money without any physical money moving. It is described as a money transfer without money movement." [Investopedia \(2023\)](#)

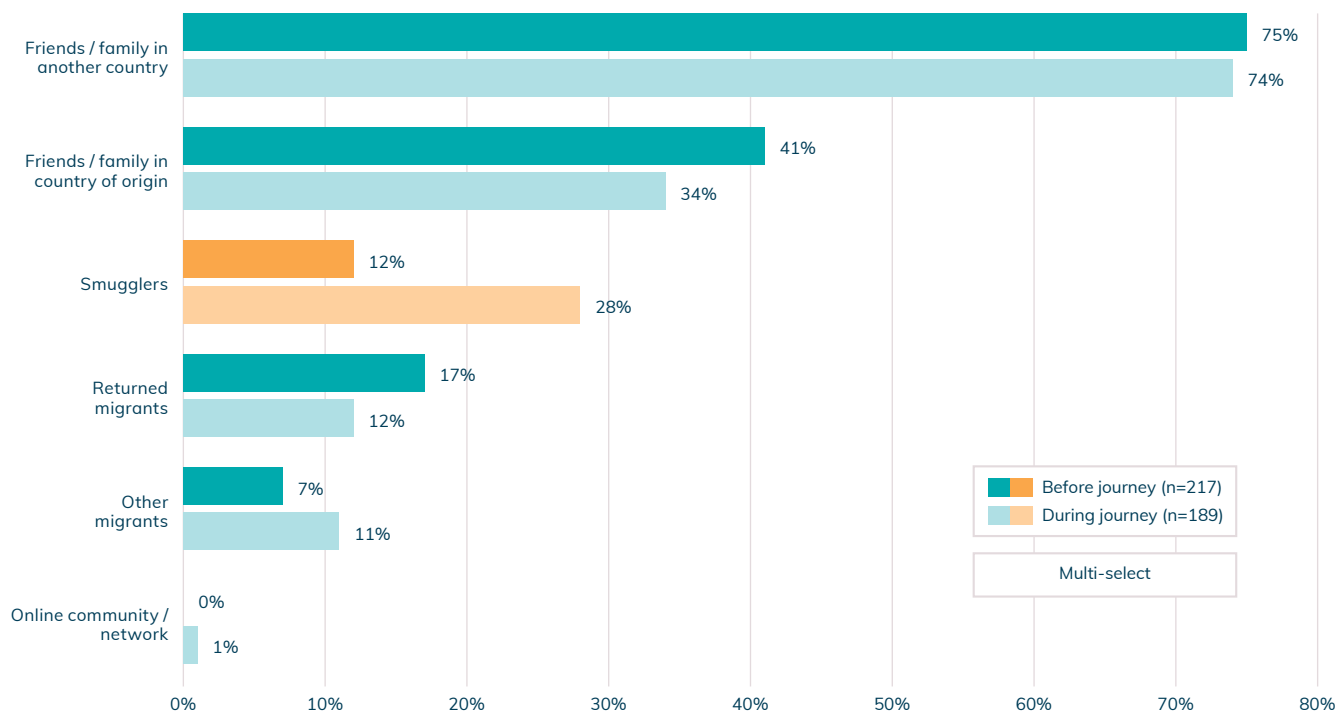
44 UNODC (2023). [The Hawala System: Its operations and misuse by opiate traffickers and migrant smugglers](#)

45 MMC (n.d.). [4Mi Interactive](#); MMC (2024). [Human rights in the context of smuggling: Perceptions and experiences of migrants in Mali and Niger](#); MMC & UNHCR (2021). [A Roadmap for Advocacy, Policy Development, and Programming: Protection in Mixed Movements along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes 2021](#)

46 MMC (forthcoming) Perceptions and role of smugglers in migration decision-making of Eritrean, Ethiopian, and South Sudanese migrants in Port Sudan

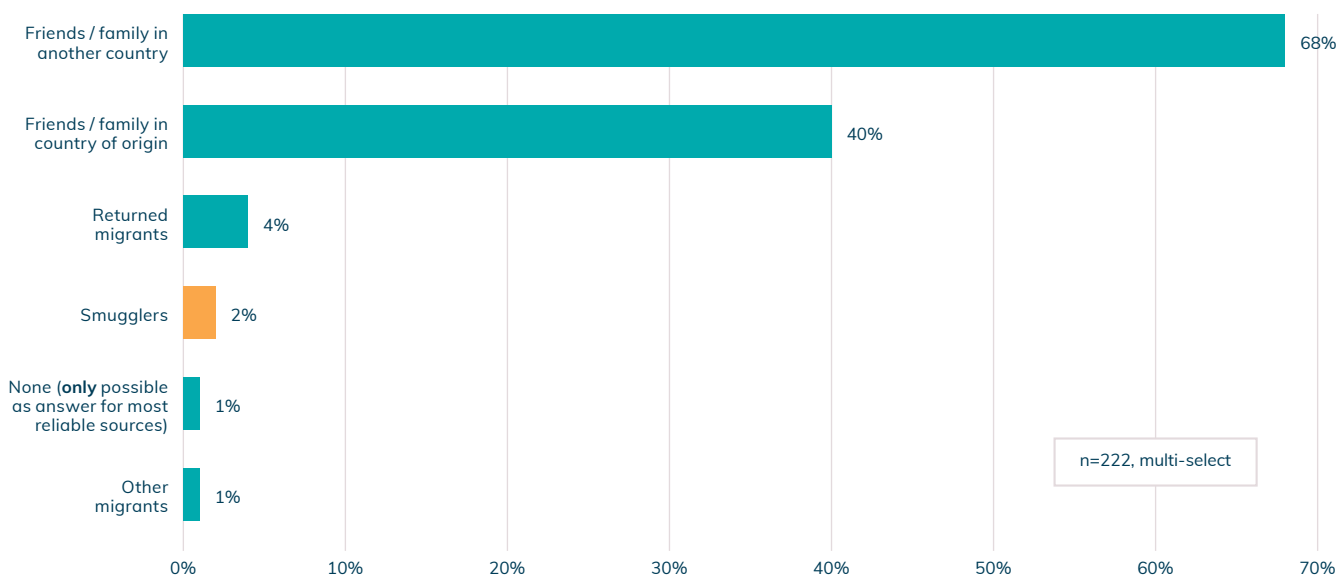
47 ICPMPD (2015). [A study on smuggling of migrants - Characteristics, responses and cooperation with third countries](#)

Figure 11. Sources of information before and during the journey



Despite approximately 20% of respondents overall receiving information from smugglers, they were rarely seen as reliable sources (2%). Once again, the vast majority of respondents cited family and friends as the most reliable information source. Migrants' mistrust of information from smugglers aligns with results presented below on their overwhelming feelings of being misled by their smugglers and strengthens the notion that the **migrant-smuggler relationships along this route are driven by necessity, rather than trust and reliability.**

Figure 12. Most reliable source of information

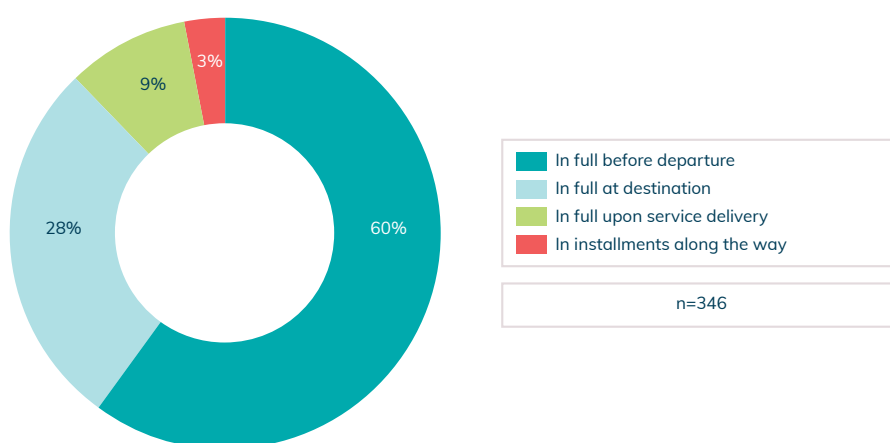


Financing of smuggling

A considerable share of respondents (60%) paid the smuggler in full before departure, which is a common payment arrangement as highlighted by several MMC studies on human smuggling across various regions worldwide.⁴⁸ Consistent with the findings from migrant respondents, 11 out of 16 interviewed smugglers indicated that migrants typically pay their fee at the time of departure, and the payments are made in cash and in person. **Upfront payments potentially increase migrants' vulnerability as their resources become depleted at the very start of the journey** and they risk being forced to work for their smugglers or subject to other abuses if unforeseen costs arise and/or smugglers further along the route attempt to extract additional funds from their clients.⁴⁹ Another key factor that increases vulnerability is that, once smugglers are paid upfront, they no longer have an incentive to ensure migrants' safe arrival; in contrast, payment upon safe arrival would provide such an incentive.

Of the remaining 40%, 28% of respondents agreed to pay in full upon reaching their final destination,⁵⁰ whereas 9% paid in full upon delivery of specific services (i.e., successfully crossing borders) (Figure 13). A 2019 MMC study observed that those who paid smugglers upon reaching their destination were less likely to face incidents as compared to those who paid in full before departure.⁵¹ Paying upon service delivery may be limited to the agreed-upon services, which in this case, primarily involved facilitating the sea crossing.

Figure 13. Paying the smuggler



On average, **97% of the respondents paid around 300 USD⁵² to the smuggler for their services** and most smugglers (13 out of 16) highlighted that the type of service offered is a key factor influencing the price they charge. This estimate, keeping in mind that most respondents cited using smugglers for crossing a border and for only part of the journey, is comparable to estimates from previous RMMS (MMC's predecessor) and IOM reporting, with 500 USD cited as an average for the entire journey from Ethiopia to Yemen.⁵³ With an average of 100,000 migrants making this crossing every year, this would amount to **a smuggling business worth 30 million USD annually, primarily for the sea crossing**, a significant source of income for smugglers operating out of Djibouti.

Just 3% of respondents paid in instalments which ranged from 100 to 700 USD. These respondents ended up paying almost double for smuggler-facilitated segments of the journey as compared to the respondents who paid in full for these services upon departure or arrival. While these results should be treated with caution given the small sample size, they suggest that **migrants who pay in instalments, likely because they are not able to mobilize sufficient resources, end up paying higher fees. When they arrive in their preferred destinations, it is likely that they (and**

48 MMC (2024). [Following the money: Understanding the economics of human smuggling in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia](#); MMC (2022). [Financing of human smuggling in West and North Africa](#)

49 MMC and Ravenstone Consult (2023). [Captive commodities: "This route is like a fire"](#)

50 Surveys were conducted in Lahj, Yemen which is a transit country for 99% of the respondents and the top countries of preferred destination were Saudi Arabia (92%), Oman (3%), United Arab Emirates (2%), and Jordan (1%)

51 MMC (2019). [What makes refugees and migrants vulnerable to detention in Libya?](#)

52 Respondents mentioned the payment in local currency but was converted to USD by the enumerators on the spot. The exact average is 287 USD. This figure is the average calculation of the 333 respondents who paid in full to the smuggler either before departure, upon service delivery or agreed to pay in full upon reaching the destination. Also, MMC does not record the financing dynamics separately for different legs of the journey (for example to reach Obock or Bosaso, sea journey to reach Yemen, and from Yemen to Saudi Arabia), so these figures cannot be compared to the average prices for the sea journey alone or for the full journey from Ethiopia to the destination.

53 RMMS (2017). [Djibouti Country Statement](#); IOM (2020). [Comparative Eastern Corridor Route Analysis: Obock, Djibouti and Bosaso, Puntland](#)

their families in origin communities) are under greater pressure to recoup their expenses, which could increase their vulnerability to exploitive work arrangements. Interestingly, according to six smugglers, they increased their fees over the past six months due to heightened risks associated with stricter government controls, possibly alluding to anti-smuggling crackdowns and military campaigns since August 2023. This highlights that the costs of the journey are sensitive to contextual changes, which may also explain why incremental payments overtime may result in higher costs.

Perceptions of smugglers

All (100%) surveyed migrants agreed that smugglers had intentionally misled them (Figure 14), indicating a high level of misinformation and misdealing, and providing insight into why so few respondents (2%) perceived the information provided by smugglers as reliable. A majority of respondents were youth (18-24 years old), and with lower educational attainment, which may have increased their vulnerability to being misled at the hands of smugglers.⁵⁴ That said, 99% also agreed that their smugglers helped them to achieve their migration goal for this segment of the journey (Figure 15) – which was most likely to reach Yemen, where respondents were interviewed – highlighting the complex nature of migrant-smuggler relationships as both exploitive and instrumental. Previous MMC reports on smuggling reveal that smugglers might be seen as both the perpetrators of abuse and crime and providers of a crucial service.⁵⁵ This striking contrast highlights the unique nature of the Eastern Route, where such a disparity between deception and facilitation by smugglers has not been observed on any other routes covered by MMC.

Figure 14. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers”

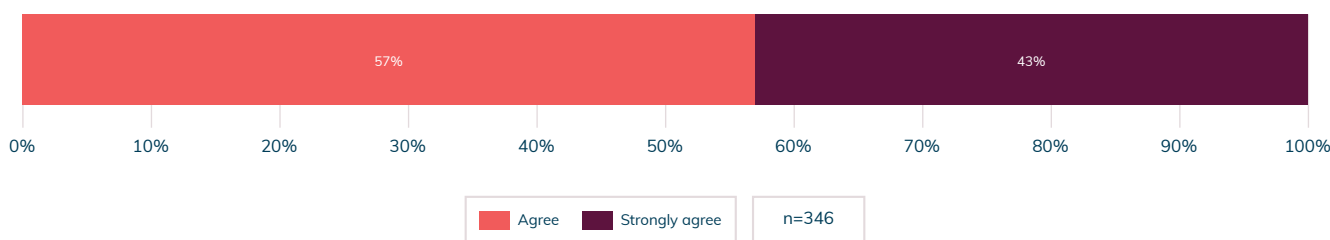
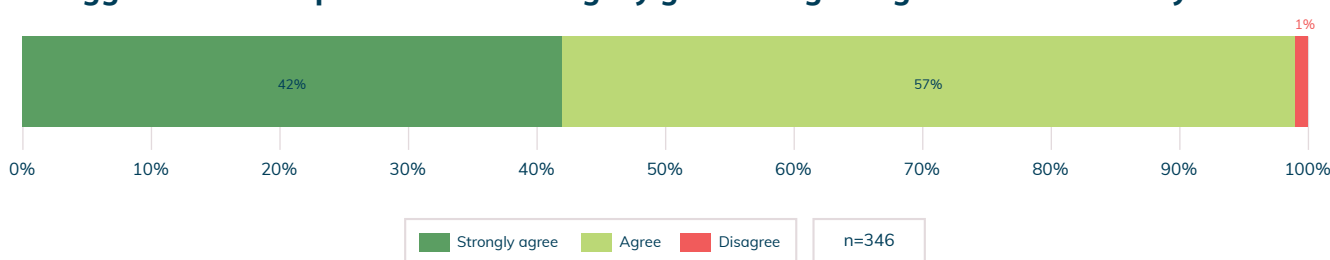


Figure 15. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “The smuggler of smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country”

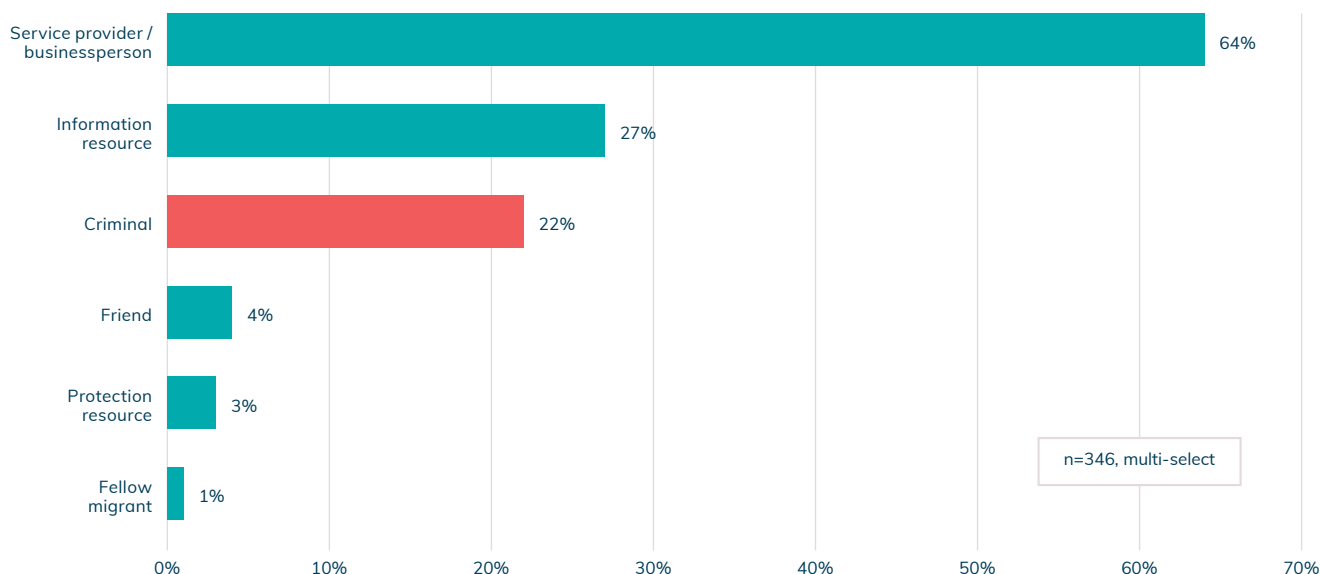


54 66% of respondents were aged 18-24 and 61% of respondents reported having a primary school education, while 29% have completed secondary or high school.

55 MMC (2024). [Secondary actors: the role of smugglers in mixed migration through the Americas](#); MMC (2024). [Comparing Smuggling Dynamics: from Myanmar to Malaysia and Thailand](#); MMC (2024). [Human rights in the context of smuggling: Perceptions and experiences of migrants in Mali and Niger](#)

To further explore the complexity of this relationship, respondents were asked to describe their smugglers. A majority (64%) viewed their smugglers as a service providers / businesspersons, followed by 27% who described them as an information resource, albeit an unreliable one. Some 22% of surveyed migrants framed their smugglers as criminals. These contrasting depictions highlight **the dual role smugglers can play as both perpetrators of crime and abuse and service providers** (Figure 16).⁵⁶

Figure 16. Description of smugglers by migrants



Incidents linked to smugglers and migrants' strategies for keeping safe

The vast majority of respondents (96%) mentioned at least one dangerous location on their journey. Among them, 72% identified smugglers as potential perpetrators of abuse and crime in these dangerous locations, with physical violence (82%), death (68%), and robbery (58%) reported as the most commonly perceived risks (see Figure 17).⁵⁷ These high levels of risks perceived by respondents indicate that migrants along this route remain particularly vulnerable to abuse at the hands of smugglers. Moreover, incidence of sexual violence (33%) and kidnapping (23%) could be indicators of more extreme trafficking dynamics, as migrant respondents are not always able to clearly distinguish between smuggling and trafficking in persons.

The majority of the dangerous locations (98%) mentioned by respondents were in Djibouti, largely owing to the sample of respondents interviewed in Lahj, and not in other locations further away from the Yemeni coast. MMC data from Somalia with Ethiopians intending to migrate onward along the Eastern Route also reveals dangerous locations within Somalia.⁵⁸ As this research did not collect data in Yemen in other locations beyond Lahj, it does not fully include the scope of risks and abuse faced by migrants who transit through Yemen and reach Saudi Arabia.⁵⁹ Several qualitative studies previously conducted by RMMS also highlight the multiple dangers faced by migrants including, but not limited to, kidnapping, sexual violence, and physical violence, and demonstrating a link between smuggler engagement and riskier journeys.⁶⁰

56 Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. (2018). [Both Angels and Demons? The role and nature of migrant smugglers](#)

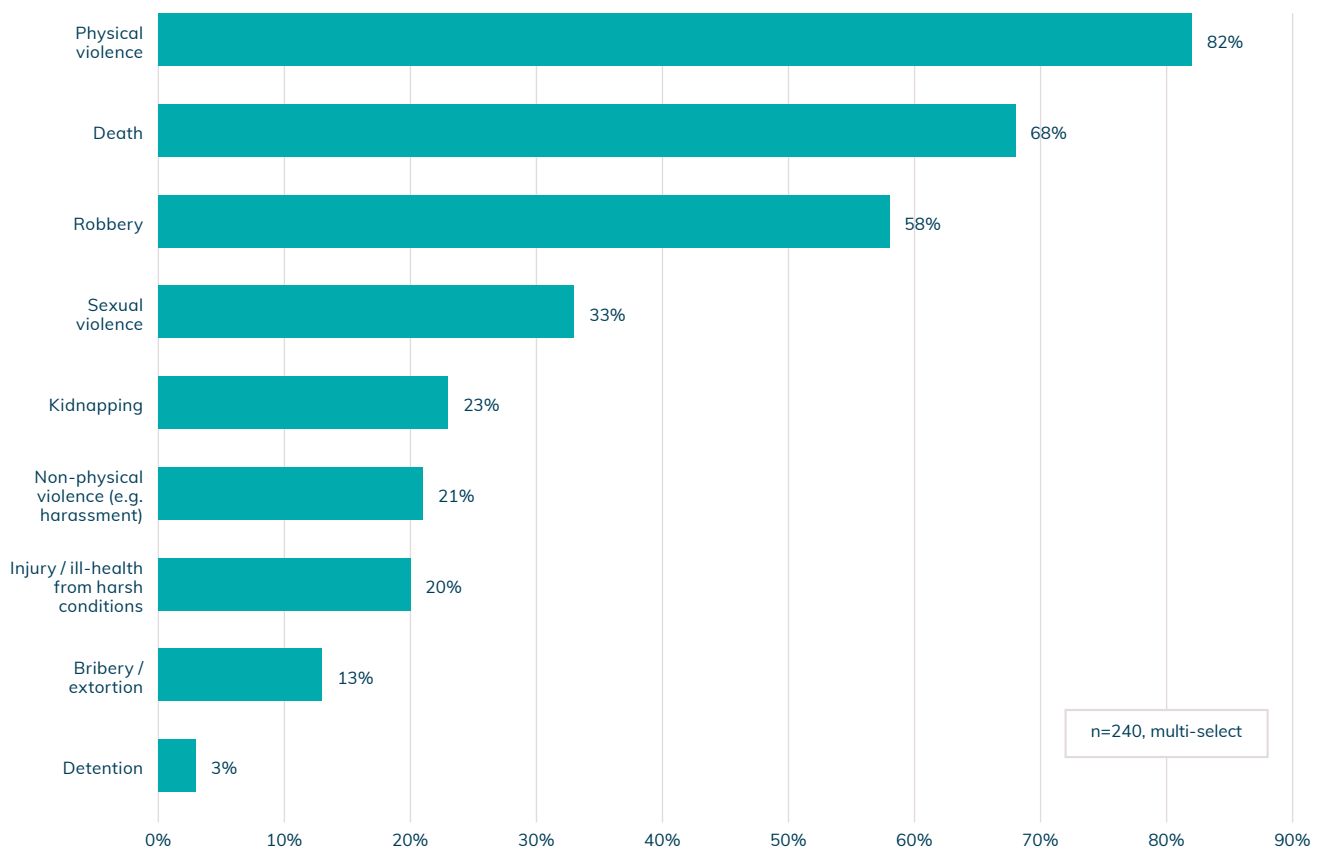
57 This survey question was asked of respondents who identified one or more locations as dangerous along their journey. For each location, they were asked what the main risks were and who was likely to have been perpetrating such incidents of abuse and crime. This analysis is for the 72% of the respondents (n=240) who perceived smugglers to be carrying out such incidents in those reported dangerous locations.

58 MMC-UNHCR (2024). [Mixed Movements in Somalia: Dangerous locations, smuggling dynamics and access to information and assistance](#)

59 U.S. Department of State (2023). [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Yemen](#)

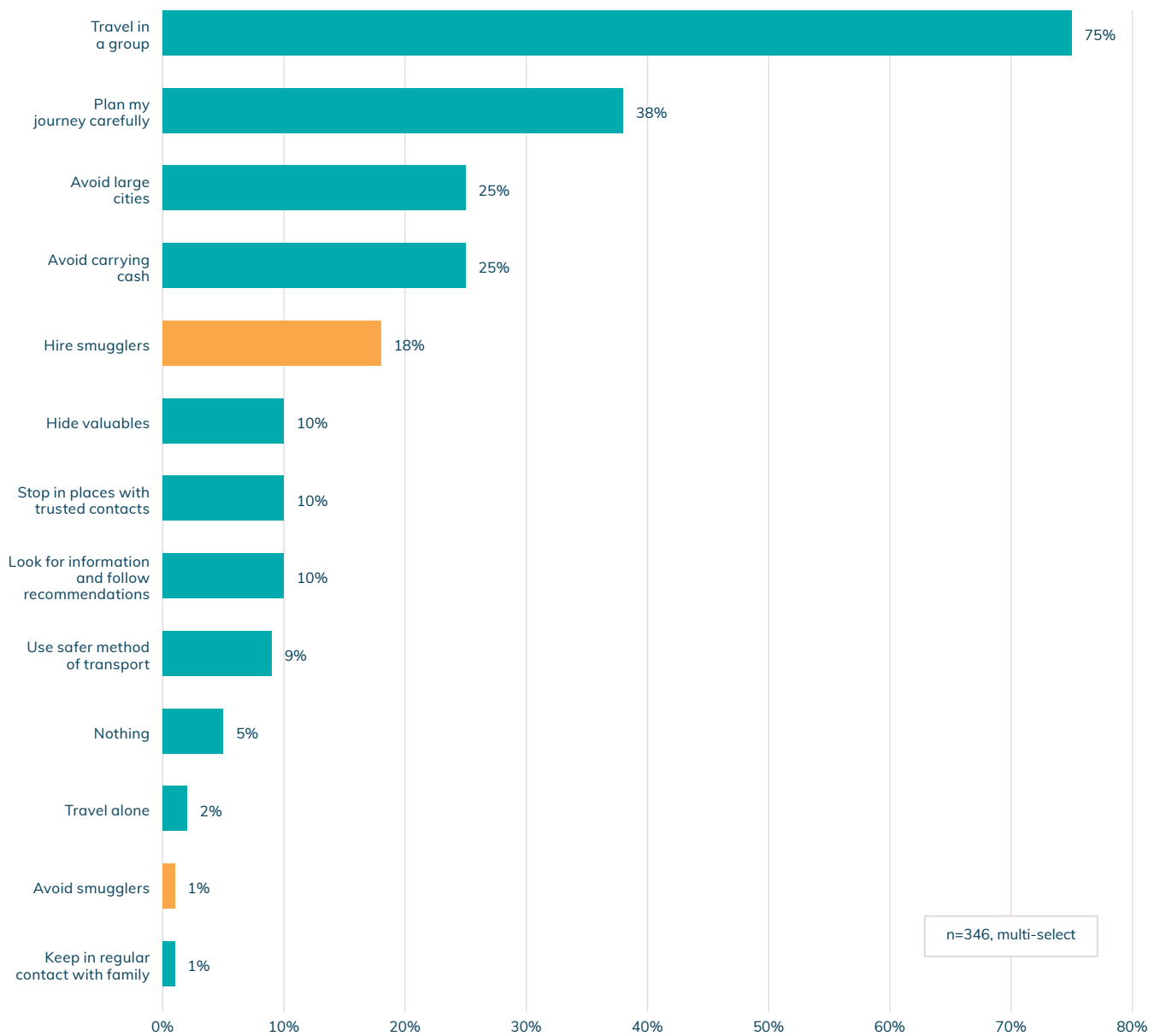
60 Ravenstone Consult (2023). [Captive commodities: "This route is like a fire"](#); Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. (2023). [Murderous Border Controls](#); IOM (2021). [To Change My Life - Risk perception, expectations and migration experiences of young Ethiopians migrating along the Eastern Route toward the Arabian Peninsula](#); RMMS (2017). [Unpacking the Myths: Human smuggling from and within the Horn of Africa](#).

Figure 17. Incidents reported in the dangerous locations where smugglers were perceived as perpetrators



Respondents relied on various strategies to protect themselves from abuse and crime during the journey. The majority (75%) travelled in a group as a safety precaution, followed by careful planning of the journey (38%) (Figure 18). Smugglers were seldom hired (18%) for protection, while 1% avoided them as a protection strategy, once again highlighting the contrasting roles that smugglers play.

Figure 18. How do you protect yourself from abuse and crime during the journey?



Conclusion and recommendations

While the Eastern Route is known to be among the busiest and most perilous mixed migration routes in the world,⁶¹ there is a considerable quantitative data gap on the experiences of migrants moving through Yemen, smugglers' perspectives, and on smuggling dynamics in the country. Based on data collected from 346 migrants in Yemen and 16 smugglers in Ethiopia who organise journeys along the Eastern Route, this report contributes to the evidence base on the nature and dynamics of migrant smuggling along the Eastern Route, which generates approximately 30 million USD annually for the relatively short segment of the route between Djibouti and Yemen. The findings reveal that, overall, smugglers have little influence on migrants' decision to migrate and the routes they take. Smugglers are largely perceived as service providers who facilitate border transits and sea crossings. At the same time, this report underscores the complexity of migrant-smuggler relationships, which appears to be based on necessity rather than trust or reliability: smugglers are seen as responsible for serious abuse and human rights violations and for intentionally misleading clients, and as instrumental to achieve migration objectives. Comparatively, on no other route globally has MMC observed such a disparity within migrants' perception of smugglers. It shows the extent to which smugglers on this route are seen as a necessary evil.

More in-depth research is needed to explore smuggling dynamics within Yemen, which would require data collection within other locations in Yemen and in migrants' destination countries in the Arabian Peninsula. This understanding is key for developing evidence-based policymaking and programming responses to address protection and safety concerns related to smuggling dynamics in the Horn of Africa and Yemen.

Based on the findings of this study, key recommendations include:

- **Mixed migration programming should target the main stopping locations and transit hubs along the route** in Djibouti and Somalia to provide people on the move with assistance, information on the risks in Yemen and other Gulf countries, and information on where and how to access assistance if migrants become stranded along the route.
- As migrants primarily rely on their friends and family for information before and during the journey, governments and assistance providers **need to target these groups as key stakeholders to promote access to reliable information on making the journey safer, available legal pathways, and assistance available along the route** to mitigate the impact of migrants being misled by smugglers.
- The severity of incidents and risks perceived by migrants by the time they reach Lahj, Yemen, underscores the **need for scaled up and integrated protection programming in Yemen**.
- While demand persists for labour migration in the Gulf states, local, regional, and national authorities should work together to **promote more (accessible) legal pathways, to alleviate the demand for smugglers, and to call for greater monitoring in Gulf states of the protection of the rights of workers**.
- Protection actors working in the Horn of Africa and Yemen should **strengthen advocacy efforts on risks and abuses along the Eastern Route, following the increased attention on, and media coverage of, continued shipwrecks** in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden leading to migrant deaths and **on the dire situation that migrants face in Yemen and destination countries** farther afield on the Arabian Peninsula.
- Research institutions, UN agencies, and NGOs should **engage in further research and analysis, and carry out larger-scale data collection**, specifically in Yemen and targeting hard to reach populations including women and with migrants looking to transit the Red Sea in the opposite direction towards the Horn of Africa. The empirical data can be used to better understand the experiences and vulnerabilities of migrants transiting through Yemen and moving along the Eastern Route.

61 MRP (n.d.). [Where is the Eastern Route?](#)



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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