Smuggling and migration in South America:

Insights from migrants

PAPER

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About this paper

This paper explores the use of smugglers by migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean on their journeys through South America. It is based on 1,129 4Mi surveys and 29 interviews with migrants in Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Argentina and Uruguay conducted between July and October 2024, along with 11 key informant interviews.[1] This paper presents findings on the profiles of migrants who hired smugglers along their journey, the motivations for using them, the services sought, and their general perceptions of smugglers. It also provides information on smugglers' profiles and modes of operation on South American migration routes. This paper offers empirical evidence to inform decision-makers and humanitarian actors.

Key findings

- The use of smugglers is not the norm on migration routes through South America, with only one in five survey respondents reporting having used smugglers during their migration process. Low smuggler use is likely the result of freedom of movement under regional agreements, established migrant networks, and familiarity with well-trodden migration routes, and limited financial capacity.

- Smuggler use among Venezuelan respondents is higher than among other South American nationalities (23%, compared to 9% of Colombians, 5% of those from the Southern Cone, and just 2% from other Andean countries), likely due to increasing entry restrictions placed upon them.

- Smuggler use increases when movements are more restricted, for example crossing into Peru and Chile, where migrants surveyed and interviewed commonly reported relying on smugglers.

- The main services provided by smugglers to respondents were assistance with crossing borders (83%), transportation (65%), the provision of food and water (50%), the provision of documents (33%), and dealing with authorities (31%).

- Smugglers in South America have diverse profiles and operate via multiple methods. The majority come from local communities or are migrants who live and operate in transit locations. However, a few smugglers operate in countries of origin—primarily Venezuela—offering "all-inclusive packages" from Venezuela to the intended destination.

- Most migrants who use smugglers perceive them as service providers. Some see them as a buffer against the dangers along the route, and another small portion as a potential perpetrator of abuse.

- Smugglers were the least mentioned possible perpetrator of incidents among surveyed migrants (7%); other actors, such as members of criminal gangs (55%) and host communities (53%), rank considerably higher as possible threats.

A note on "smuggling" and "smugglers"

MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities—paid for or otherwise compensated by migrants—that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants' definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences.[2]

Depending on their location, migrants in Latin America use a variety of terms for such service providers, such as agents, guides, advisors, facilitators, *chamberos*, *trocheros*, *cargueros*, and *coyotes*. While 4Mi surveyors reference geographically appropriate terms in their interactions with respondents, the survey and this text use "smuggler" as a general term for all of them.

1 4Mi is MMC's flagship quantitative data collection project. 4Mi questionnaires cover why people leave their places of origin, the alternatives they explored, destination options, influences on decision-making, and other topics (global data and data on Latin America and the Caribbean can be accessed through 4Mi Interactive dashboards).

2 For more information on MMC terminology, see: Mixed Migration Centre, MMC (2024a) MMC's understanding and use of the terms Mixed migration and Human smuggling. | The international instrument defining migrant 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

South America has a long history of mixed migration, with most movement occurring within the subcontinent. Since 2015, Venezuelans have made up the majority of migrants in South America, with nearly eighty percent of the 7.8 million who left their country over the past decade, settling in neighbouring countries within the subregion.[3] Departures from Venezuela are continuing, and some of those who had previously migrated to other South American countries—often facing challenges in integrating—are embarking on onward movements, while others are returning to Venezuela. There are also other significant intraregional movements involving nationals from other South American countries, primarily Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.[4] Migrants from beyond the region, including those from the Caribbean, are also part of mixed migration in South America.[5]

Since 1969, when the Andean Community (CAN) was formed, the citizens of member countries—Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia—have been able to enter the group's countries without a passport or visa.[6] Likewise, since 1991, with the establishment of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR),[7] citizens of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, and Uruguay have benefited from the same free circulation scheme.[8] The result of these integration mechanisms, has historically made hiring smugglers significantly less necessary than in other contexts.

However, in 2006, Venezuela withdrew from the CAN and was suspended from MERCOSUR in 2016. As a result, Venezuelans, the nationality with the highest number of people on the move in the region, must present a valid passport and meet each country's entry requirements, which many are unable to fulfil due to administrative and financial barriers to obtaining official documents in Venezuela. Nevertheless, despite increasing difficulty in regularly crossing borders, smuggler use still remains the exception rather than the norm.

More broadly, a general increase in migration throughout South America has been accompanied by more restrictive migration policies,[9] with countries such as Chile, Peru and Ecuador[10] tightening border controls, including militarising borders, introducing entry and transit documentation requirements, limiting regularisation pathways and asylum mechanisms, and fuelling narratives of criminalisation of migration.[11] This shift continues alongside the Trump administration's hardline approach to migration in the United States, which will likely only further strain regional migration systems and reinforce restrictive policy trends.[12]

Although this research shows that, for now, the use of smugglers remains low in South America—one in five migrants stated they hired a smuggler during their journey—, tightening restrictions will likely lead to a greater reliance on smugglers. Therefore, understanding smuggling dynamics is becoming increasingly relevant.

This paper analyses the use of smugglers among migrants on South American migration routes. It provides information on why migrants currently use (or do not use) smugglers, how they use them, the most common services provided, key smuggling hotspots, fees charged, methods of contact, profiles of smugglers, and how migrants perceive smugglers.

3 At least 6.2 million Venezuelans (79%) are in South American countries. See: R4V (2024) Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.
4 See Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates by MMC in the region. | International Organization for Migration, IOM (2023) Movimientos migratorios recientes en América del Sur. Informe Anual 2023 – Foro Especializado Migratorio de MERCOSUR y Estados Asociados (FEM).
5 IOM (2024) Tendencias de migración en las Américas. Informe trimestral abril-junio 2024.
6 Andean Community (n.d.) Derechos del ciudadano andino.
7 Southern Common Market, MERCOSUR (n.d.) MERCOSUR in brief. What is MERCOSUR?
8 MERCOSUR (n.d.) Circulación de personas (only available in Spanish).
9 CODHES (2023) El avance de políticas migratorias regresivas en el continente: falta de canales de regularización accesibles, militarización de fronteras y control de la migración.
10 Chile: Doña-Reveco, C. (2024) How Chile's welcome turned sour. MMC. | Dote, S. (2024) Ley de Migraciones en Chile: qué dicen las modificaciones aprobadas por los diputados. El País. | Amnesty International (2023) Chile y Perú: Autoridades deben poner fin a la militarización de fronteras como respuesta al ingreso de personas en necesidad de protección. | Peru: Chávez, G. (2024a) Desafíos actuales de la política migratoria en el Perú. IDEHPUCP. | Swissinfo (2024) Perú comienza a exigir visa y pasaporte a todos los ciudadanos venezolanos. | Ecuador: Ministry of Government (2019) Entró en vigencia el visado para ciudadanos venezolanos. | Swissinfo (2021) Ecuador aumenta presencia militar en frontera con Perú para vigilar migración.
11 See Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates by MMC in the region.
12 Washington Office for Latin America, WOLA (2025) Trump's Executive Orders and Latin America: Key Things to Know.

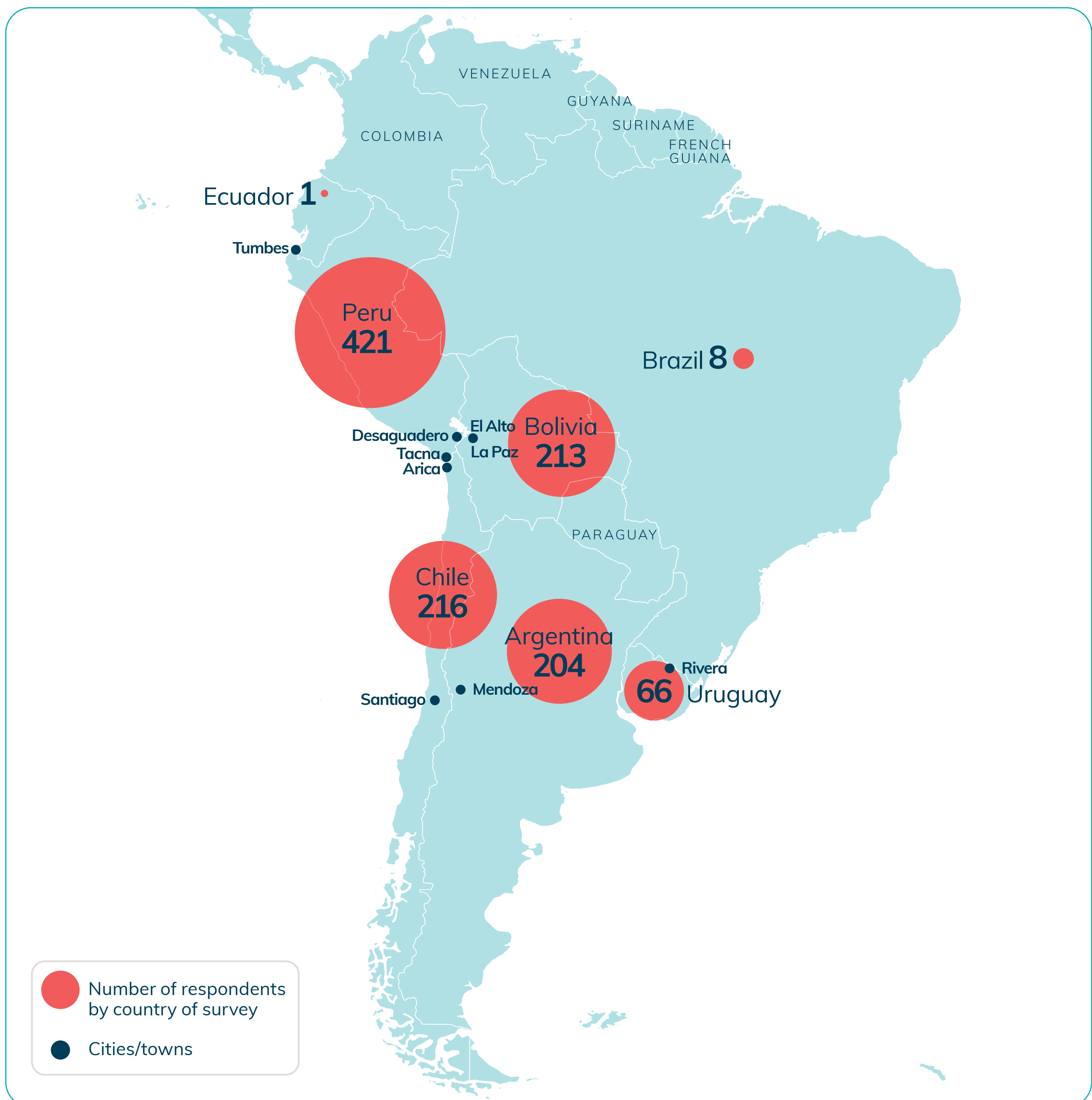
Methodology

This paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Ecuador.

Quantitative data collection

Data was collected through 1,129 4Mi surveys in-person and via phone with Latin American and Caribbean migrants in South America between July 12 and October 15, 2024.[13] The surveys were carried out at key points along migration routes in Peru (421), Chile (216), Bolivia (213), Argentina (204), Uruguay (66), Brazil (8) and Ecuador (1) (See Map 1).

Map 1. 4Mi data collection points



13 85 surveys were conducted by telephone: 43 in Chile, 27 in Argentina, 11 in Uruguay, 2 in Peru, 1 in Brazil and 1 in Ecuador.

For the analysis, the total sample of 1,129 surveys was divided into two subsamples: those who used a smuggler during their journey (n=224) and those who did not (n=905). This division was made to compare certain migration experiences between the two groups.

The quantitative data provided information on the use of smugglers, the methods of use, the services utilised, and migrants' perceptions of smugglers.

Respondent profiles

A small majority (58%) of survey respondents in the selected dataset were men; the rest (42%) were women. This slight gender imbalance derives from the study's convenience sampling (see Limitations below). Regarding age distribution, 68% of respondents were between 18 and 35 years old, 20% between 36 and 45 years old, and only 12% were 46 or older.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents were Venezuelan nationals, 12% Colombians, 14% from other Andean countries (Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador), 5.5% were from Southern Cone countries (Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay), 4.5% were from Caribbean countries (Cuba and Haiti), and 1% were from Central America (Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica).[14]

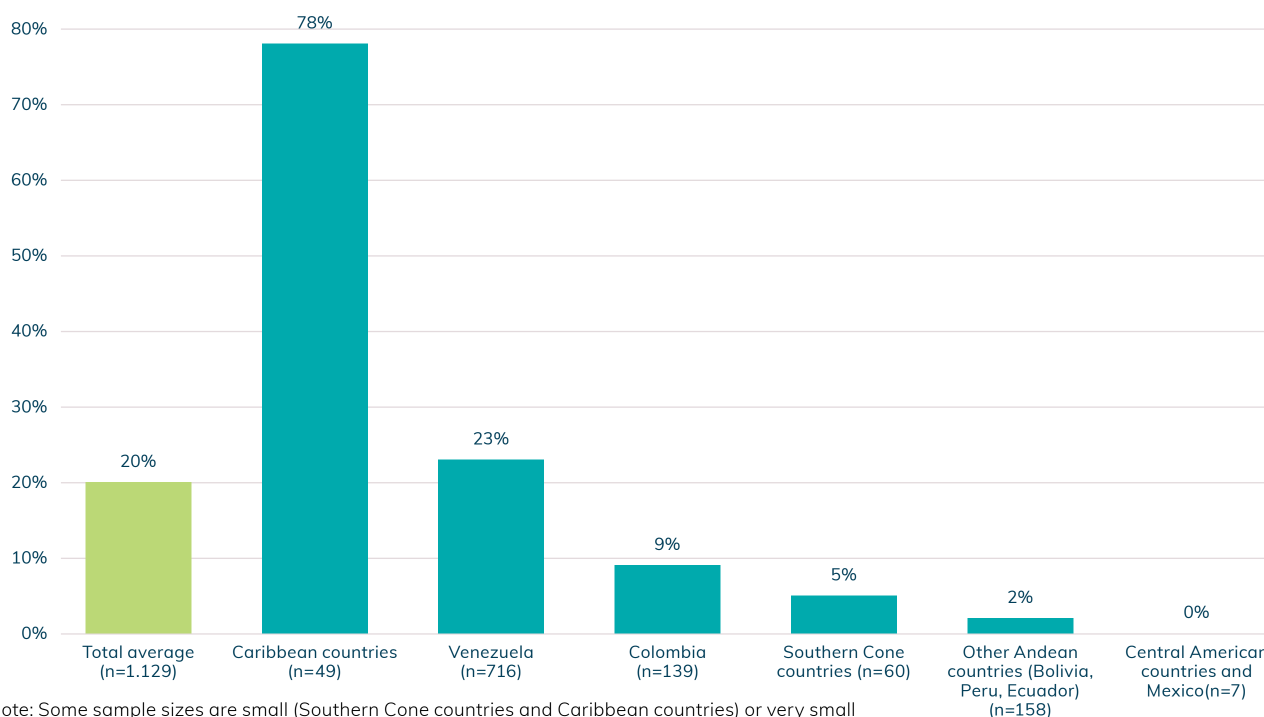
Profiles of smuggler-users

Among respondents, the proportion of those who used smugglers was only slightly higher among women (22%) than men (18%) and remained consistent across age groups. The differences in smuggler use between men and women are not substantial, and neither the interviewed migrants nor the key informants reported any gender-related distinctions, thereby not warranting further analysis.

Meanwhile, a quarter (24%) of the 360 respondents travelling with children in their care reported having used smugglers, a slightly higher proportion than the 18% of the 769 respondents travelling without children. As previous MMC research has shown, migrants caring for children face greater challenges along the route[15], which may lead some to rely on smugglers for help with carrying their belongings, providing transportation, and ensuring protection.

Notable differences in the use of smugglers were observed by nationality. Caribbean and Venezuelan nationals surveyed reported the highest rates of smuggler use, at 78% and 23%, respectively, both exceeding the overall average (20%) and numbers for other nationalities. In contrast, smuggler use was reported by only 9% of the 139 Colombian respondents, 5% of the 60 respondents from the Southern Cone, and just 2% of the 158 respondents from other Andean countries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Smuggler-users by nationality



Note: Some sample sizes are small (Southern Cone countries and Caribbean countries) or very small (Central American countries and Mexico) and should be interpreted with caution.

14 Five nationals of five countries outside Latin America and the Caribbean also responded to the 4Mi survey during the period of study but their data has been excluded from the analysis because their profiles and contexts did not fit the study's focus on migrants from within the region.

15 Canal Laiton, X. (2023) Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras. MMC.

As detailed in a previous MMC study,[16] Caribbean citizens resort to smugglers more frequently than other nationalities in the region due to the challenges departing from island states. Since this smuggling dynamic occurs in the Caribbean rather than South America, this paper will not address it. Meanwhile, Venezuelan nationals' greater reliance on smugglers is explained by the stricter and specific entry requirements imposed on them in some South American countries. The findings section of the paper will examine these factors in detail.

Qualitative data collection

Qualitative information was collected through individual and group interviews with 29 people on the move: 16 men and 13 women, most of Venezuelan nationality (21) but also Colombian (6), Peruvian (1) and Bolivian (1) with diverse migration profiles, routes and experiences. These interviews were conducted at well-frequented migration transit points. Sixteen people were interviewed in Tumbes (on the Ecuador-Peru border), five in Desaguadero (Peru-Bolivia border), four in El Alto (Bolivia), two in Arica (Peru-Chile border), one in Mendoza (Argentina), and one in Santiago de Chile (Chile). These interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of migration experiences involving the use of smugglers, the factors driving their use, the places where they are most used, the methods of contact and payment, and the migrants' perceptions of smugglers.

Eleven key informants provided invaluable insights into a range of topics, factors that influence the use of smugglers, smuggler profiles, and security risks along the route, including those involving smugglers. These experts were selected due to their in-depth knowledge of the dynamics and causes of migrant smuggling in South America. They work for organisations that, among other actions, offer protection, legal advice or shelter services to migrants, as well as for state agencies and academic institutions.[17]

General limitations

- This paper draws much of its analysis from responses to the 4Mi survey question, “Did you use a smuggler during your trip?” MMC acknowledges that data on the use of smugglers may be underreported, as some respondents may avoid disclosing their use of smugglers due to fears of potential criminal consequences. Furthermore, although MMC enumerators pose this question using local terms for smugglers (such as guides, advisors, agents, facilitators, *chamberos*, *trocheros*, *cargueros*, and coyotes), MMC also recognises that many respondents may pay smugglers for their irregular migration without identifying them as such, complicating the accurate identification of these dynamics.
- The 4Mi survey employs convenience sampling; thus, the respondents were adult migrants selected at key locations who agreed to participate in the research. Therefore, the survey results are illustrative and cannot be considered statistically representative of the dynamics and perceptions regarding the use of smugglers in South America.

16 Canal Laiton, X. (2024) Secondary Actors: the role of smugglers in mixed migration through the Americas. MMC.
17 In alphabetical order, we recognise and thank the contributions of the participating organisations and experts: Anonymous humanitarian NGO, CARE Perú - Tumbes office, Cáritas Tacna-Moquegua, Consulate of Colombia in Bolivia, Encuentros - Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes - Tacna office, Fundación Munasim Kullakita - Bolivia, Fundación Scalabrini – Arica shelter, International Organization for Migration - Tumbes office, Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos de Chile, Nanette Liberona Concha PhD, and Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes – SJM Bolivia.

Findings

1. Smuggler use among migrants in South America

1.1 Smuggler use in South America is not the norm

According to 4Mi data, the use of smugglers by Latin American and Caribbean migrants on the main migration routes through South America is not the norm. Among the 1,129 migrants surveyed for this research, only 20% reported using smugglers. A variety of factors likely contribute to the fact that most migrants interviewed do not use smugglers in South America, outlined below.

Regional agreements facilitate relative freedom of movement for many, reducing the need for smuggler assistance to cross borders

Historically, there has been relative freedom of movement for citizens of some countries in South America due to regional integration mechanisms—namely the Andean Community (CAN) in 1969 and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) in 1991.[18] In this context, only 9% of Colombian respondents, 5% of those from the Southern Cone, and 2% from other Andean countries reported having used smugglers (see Figure 1). However, Venezuelans face increasing restrictions to their movement and have been excluded under these regional agreements, which in turn increases the need for smugglers (discussed in detail below – Why do some migrants use smugglers?).[19]

Established migrant networks, and familiarity with well-trodden migration routes, may be a reason for low smuggler use

According to migrants interviewed, the increase in migration within the subcontinent has led to the establishment of defined migration routes where strong migrant networks have emerged, which provide information to prospective migrants, including guidance on how to evade border controls.[20]

Further, onward migration movements are common in the subcontinent. These involve individuals who, after first migrating to and attempting to settle in one country, migrate again to another one due to various difficulties they encounter.[21] Among the 1,129 respondents, 174 (15%) began their migration journey from a country other than their country of nationality. Many of those who have previously migrated are familiar with the migration routes and dynamics, reducing their need to rely on smugglers to achieve their goals. Just 10% of these 174 migrants reported having used smugglers, while among the 955 respondents who began their migration in their country of nationality, this proportion was 22%.

A lack of financial resources may also limit smuggler use

Research has found that the Venezuelan population migrating within the region has increasingly diminished financial resources.[22] As reported by interviewed migrants and key informants, one reason why the use of smugglers remains limited is the inability of the most impoverished individuals to pay for these services, even in cases where they need or wish to resort to them.

1.2 Why do some migrants use smugglers?

“At their core, [restrictive policies] are policies that push people to move that way because the requirements to migrate regularly are unattainable. (...) And from the perspective of the practice of the people who migrate, the interest to migrate goes beyond understanding that there are national borders, that there are migration policies, regulations or documents to obtain... What prevails is the will to live, the idea of ‘I need to do it [to

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18 MERCOSUR (n.d.) Op. Cit. | Andean Community (n.d.) Op. Cit.

19 MERCOSUR states may deny entry to citizens of other member or associate states even if they possess valid documentation. Particularly Chile has employed this practice. However, such refusal rates remain lower than those of Venezuelan nationals, and consequently, smuggler use is less frequent.

20 Among the sources of information on routes, destinations, costs and risks before migrating, the respondents frequently mentioned relatives and friends in a country other than the country of origin (referred by 81% of the persons surveyed) and other migrants (35%). | Although there are no previous studies on this phenomenon in South America, this was a field finding and has been recorded for the context of migration to the north of the Americas. See: Parrini Roses, R. and Flores, E. (2018) El mapa son los otros: narrativas del viaje de migrantes centroamericanos en la frontera sur de México. Íconos - Revista de Ciencias Sociales, 61, 71-90, and Canal Laiton, X. (2024) Op. Cit. MMC.

21 For more information on the drivers of successive migrations in South America, see: MMC (2024b) Migration drivers and onward movement among migrants in South America.

22 MMC (2024c) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update - Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 2.

survive]'. (...) So, there is a movement that, ultimately, does not see policies as an obstacle or barrier. (...) And all forms of movement that involve paying facilitators are attempts to advance through that clandestine mobility."

Nanette Liberona Concha, PhD

"*We paid the young man [smuggler], we managed to get through at first, but the Peruvian police turned us back and said no.*"

19-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Peru

Entry restrictions imposed on Venezuelan nationals encourage their use of smugglers

Following Venezuela's withdrawal from the CAN in 2006 and its suspension from MERCOSUR in 2016, and in response to large mixed migration movements out of Venezuela in 2017 and 2018, several South American countries began to impose restrictions on the regular entry of Venezuelans. Chile (2018), and Ecuador and Peru (2019) implemented visa requirements for Venezuelans and reinforced border controls through military presence.[23] Meanwhile, countries like Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay[24] continue to require arriving Venezuelans to possess valid identification documents, an especially onerous obligation given the political crisis in Venezuela, as well as the administrative costs/burdens and ruptures in diplomatic relations that delay or even prevent documents being issued in several countries.[25] This has fuelled irregular migration and increased the need to resort to smugglers for specific situations or segments of the journeys.[26] This is consistent with 4Mi data findings, which indicate that Venezuelan respondents rely on smugglers (23%) more than any other South American nationality interviewed (5% on average). Of the 224 respondents (20%) who reported having used smugglers, 167 were Venezuelans (75%).

Smuggler use increases where movement is more difficult: crossing into Peru and Chile are the main destinations where migrants rely on smugglers

Interviews with migrants and key informants revealed that people on the move use smugglers more frequently in areas of the subcontinent where movement is more difficult. Currently, the South American countries with the greatest barriers to entry for Venezuelans are Chile—which also restricts entry for citizens of other nationalities in the region—and Peru.

Throughout 2024, Peru hardened its securitisation and criminalisation discourse toward migrants;[27] announced new entry restrictions;[28] tightened regulations prohibiting the provision of temporary lodging, transportation and rental services to persons with irregular migration status; and intensified expulsions and deportations derived from the Special Exceptional Administrative Sanctioning Procedure (*Procedimiento Administrativo Sancionador Especial Excepcional*, PASEE).[29]

Migrants interviewed for this study frequently reported having used smugglers to enter Peru from Ecuador because they lacked required documents, were denied entry, or, for fear of deportation, they chose not to approach the border control point and instead resorted to a smuggler before arriving (see Map 2).

23 See: CNN Español (2018) Chile da nuevas opciones de residencia a venezolanos y haitianos. | Ministerio de Gobierno de Ecuador (2019) Boletín 017. Entró en vigencia el visado para ciudadanos venezolanos. | El Peruano (2019) Perú exigirá pasaporte y visa a los venezolanos. | Doña-Reveco, C. (2024) Op. Cit. MMC. | Amnesty International (2023) Op. Cit. | DW (2023) Perú militariza sus fronteras ante llegada de migrantes. | Swissinfo (2021) Op. Cit.

24 Bolivia: Fundación Munasim Kullakita (2022) Migración venezolana a Bolivia. | Brazil: Ministério das Relações Exteriores (2024) Venezolanos a Brasil. | Paraguay: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (n.d.) Requerimientos Migratorios de Ingreso y Salida del Paraguay. | Uruguay: Live in Uruguay (n.d.) Trámites de ingreso.

25 Algarra, Á. (2021) El problema de los venezolanos para obtener documentos de identidad. Voz de América | MMC (2024d) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update - Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 3.

26 For a detailed exploration of this issue, see: Testa, G. (2019) Waning welcome: the growing challenges facing mixed migration flows from Venezuela | A field assessment study in Colombia and Peru. MMC.

27 Chávez, G. (2024b) El Decreto Supremo N° 011-2024-IN y las nuevas restricciones en la política migratoria. IDEHPUC | Silva, R. (2024) Dina Boluarte acusa a migrantes venezolanos por el incremento de la inseguridad en el Perú: "Los vamos a botar". Infobae | MMC (2024d) Op. Cit.

28 Chávez, G. (2024a) Op. Cit. IDEHPUCP. | Swissinfo (2024) Op. Cit.

29 MMC (2024d) Op. Cit. | Chávez, G. (2024a) Op. Cit. IDEHPUCP.

Map 2. Frequency of smuggler use at border points

Source: Own elaboration based on interviews with migrants and key informants, as well as the following report: Sánchez, G. (2024) Diagnóstico sobre perfiles de vulnerabilidad de personas objeto de tráfico ilícito de migrantes en América del Sur. IOM

Meanwhile, Chile's increasingly numerous and stringent entry restrictions have included militarising and strengthening border controls[30] and denying entry to Venezuelans unable to meet relevant requirements as well as to nationals of MERCOSUR countries (mainly Colombia, Bolivia and Peru) who, despite meeting entry requirements, are deemed ineligible by control officials.[31]

Thus, according to the qualitative information collected, most smuggler use in South America is aimed at entering Chile and is driven by migrants' need to evade military border controls, navigate the mountains of Colchane

30 Doña-Reveco, C. (2024) Op Cit. MMC. | British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC (2023) La crisis migratoria lleva al gobierno de Boric a militarizar la frontera norte de Chile.

31 Some consular documents state that Chilean authorities may ask people entering Chile to prove that they have "economic resources that guarantee their stay in the country" to allow their entry. The cases of inadmissibility referred to in interviews with migrants and key informants are related to a lack of economic resources. See: Consulate of Colombia in Santiago de Chile (2020) Guía del inmigrante colombiano en Santiago de Chile. | General Consulate of Peru in Arica (n.d.) Preguntas frecuentes.

and the desert in Arica, as well as to avoid landmines[32] present in Arica (see Map 2).[33] With this goal, some migrants with sufficient resources hire smugglers in "all-inclusive packages" from their country of origin.[34] Others, travelling overland by bus or hitching rides on trucks, usually with a very limited budget, tend to hire them directly at border areas.

Fear-mongering is used by smugglers as a "sales" tactic

> *"The border from Ipiales to Ecuador was also open. But there were a lot of people who were scaring you so that you would pay them. They said: 'Get in the car, they will stop you, they will send you back."*

Venezuelan woman, 32 years old, interviewed in Peru

Restrictive migration policies can shape movement dynamics even when they are not consistently implemented, as their mere announcement can create anxiety among people on the move—anxiety that can also be exploited by unscrupulous smugglers. Several key informants noted that media coverage of new entry requirements led to an uptick in smugglers pressuring migrants to pay for their services to get around restrictions that had yet to be implemented. This situation was particularly noticeable during the months after Peru's July 2024 announcement that Venezuelan nationals would need a valid passport and visa to enter the country,[35] even at times when borders were open for land transit, but it has also been reported at other borders, such as the Colombian-Ecuadorian border.

Smugglers rarely influence migrant's decision to migrate

Aligned with a previous MMC study,[36] people migrating through South America rarely decide to do so under the influence of smugglers. When asked who had influenced their decision to leave the country they were in, only four out of the 1,129 migrants surveyed mentioned a smuggler. In contrast, a third part (34%) of respondents affirmed that no one had influenced their decisions, and a relevant portion cited friends and relatives in another country (41%) and in their country of origin (22%) as influences.

Beyond potential influences, mixed migration in South America is driven by broader structural and material conditions, often threatening people's survival. Factors such as economic crises, fragile governance, limited access to fundamental rights, violence, armed conflicts and restrictions on personal and collective freedoms form the basis of these displacements.[37] When asked about their motivations for migrating, 86% of respondents cited economic reasons, 46% for personal and family reasons (predominantly related to reunifying with relatives and friends), 39% to escape violence, and 38% due to the impossibility of accessing basic services.[38]

32 During the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), Chile installed almost 182.000 anti-personnel mines and anti-tank mines on the borders of neighbouring countries, including Peru. Although the country undertook a major demining process, according to SwissInfo, anti-personnel mines were removed, but not all anti-tank mines. See: SwissInfo (2024) Chile investiga la muerte de un hombre en la explosión de una mina antitanque en dictadura.

33 Liberona Concha, N., et. al. (2022) Op. Cit. Derecho PUPC, 89, 9-36. | It is important to mention that a significant part of the people who travel through South America seeking to reach Chile usually go through Bolivia, due to the low transportation and lodging costs that this country offers compared to Peru. Some interviewees stated that other migrants had mentioned to them that the Pisiga-Colchane border had less law enforcement and could be less difficult to cross, compared to the Chacalluta pass (see Map 2).

34 IOM (2022a) Op. Cit. | IOM (2022b) Op. Cit.

35 Swissinfo (2024) Op. Cit.

36 In a previous investigation on the use of smugglers along migration routes through Central and North America, only six of the 3,019 persons surveyed stated that a smuggler had influenced their decision to migrate. See: Canal Laiton, X. (2024) Op. Cit. MMC

37 World Bank (2024) Latin America and the Caribbean: Overview. | Doctors Without Borders (2023) Migración en América Latina: qué sucede en la región.

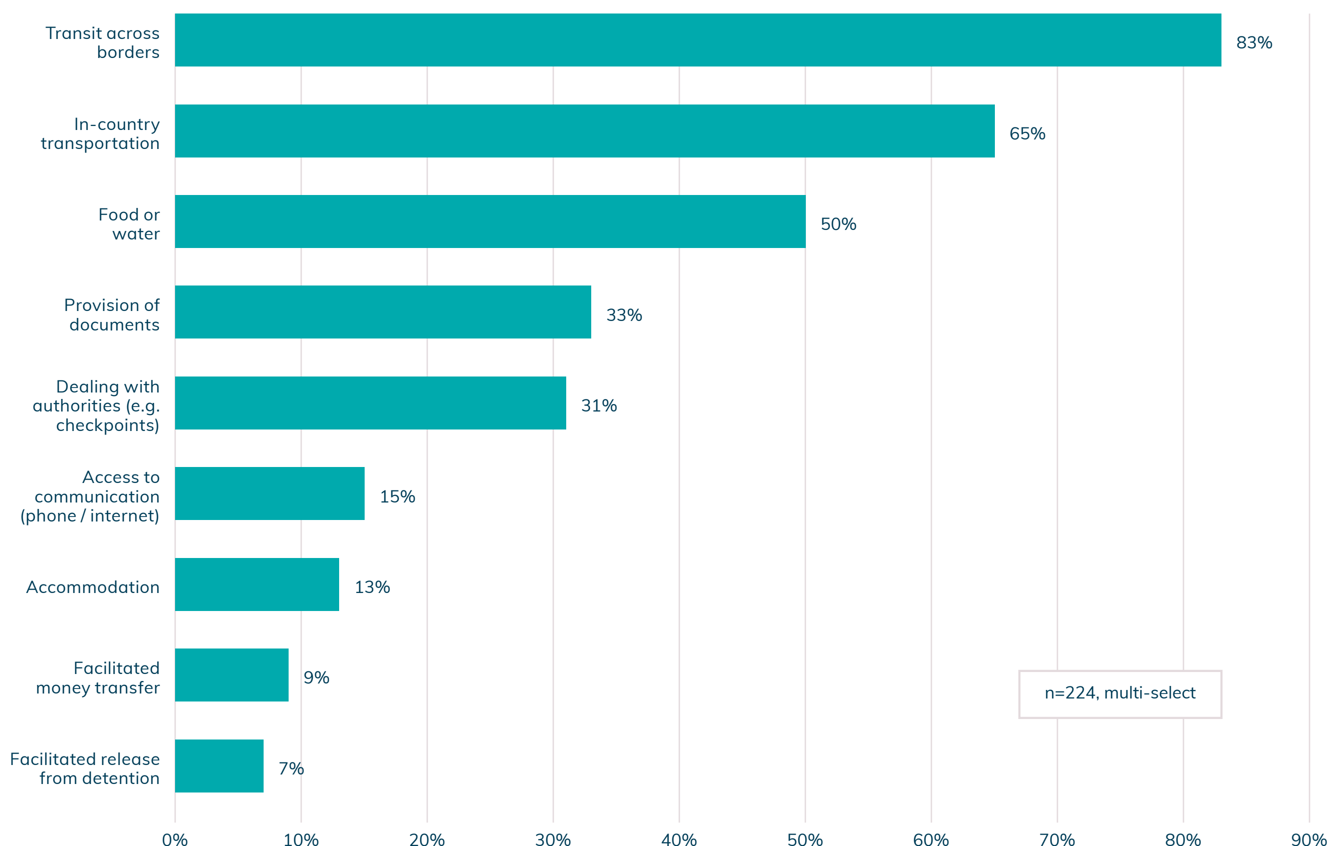
38 To see more 4Mi data and information on migration drivers, see: MMC (2024b) Op. Cit.

1.3 What do migrants in South America use smugglers for?

Smuggler services are primarily used for border crossings and transportation

A large majority (83%) of respondents who used smugglers said they did so to facilitate border crossings, while well over half (65%) used smugglers for transportation within countries (see Figure 2). The migrant interviewees echoed these motivations.

Figure 2. Main services provided by smugglers hired by the respondents
Responses to 4Mi survey question: "What services did your smuggler provide?"



Transit across borders is often arranged *in situ* and varies by location

According to the migrants interviewed, border-crossing services are typically arranged *in situ* and are commonly used for transit between Colombia-Ecuador, Ecuador-Peru, and Peru-Bolivia. Thereby, transit either involves following a trail or crossing a river (depending on the area) under the guidance of a smuggler or entails walking (alone or in small groups) through official crossing points without luggage, as luggage is transported by smugglers in small vehicles such as carts or three-wheeled motorcycles. In this second scenario, smugglers may provide migrants with clothing of a local style as a form of disguise. Both types of transit across borders occur at all times of the day.

In Desaguadero, on the border between Peru and Bolivia, key informants revealed that nighttime or early morning transit services, offered when official border surveillance is absent, are also very common.

Access to Chile, on the other hand, is typically more heavily monitored and more challenging to achieve. Migrant interviewees mentioned that smugglers facilitate border crossings in this area for groups of about ten people during the night or early morning in journeys involving up to eight hours of walking through geographically challenging areas, some of which are contaminated with landmines.

Migrants contact smugglers *in situ* mainly for specific purposes and short components of their journey

Interviews with migrants revealed that some with the financial means hire "guides" or transportation from smugglers "preventively" to avoid encounters with immigration agents in border areas. Others do not resort to smugglers until they reach a border where entry restrictions are in place, forcing them to engage smugglers to cross the border and continue their journey.

Among survey respondents who hired smugglers (n=224), most did so for only part of the journey (73%), and 16% used multiple smugglers for different segments of the journey. Only 11% used the same smuggler for the entire journey. Although information from 4Mi is not statistically representative (see *Limitations*), survey results indicate a high use of smugglers for specific purposes and short components of migrant's journeys, confirming the qualitative data.

Legal restrictions on transportation within countries encourage smuggler use

> *"We went to inquire about transportation to Lima. And at each agency, they told us: 'No, we are not taking Venezuelans anymore because Venezuelans are too much trouble'. Then we went to another agency that said, 'Well, it's 150 soles [about $40]', others said 180, 140. And it should be 50!"*

Venezuelan woman, 19 years old, interviewed in Peru

The second most frequently used service among smuggler-using survey respondents was transportation within countries along the route (cited by 65%, see Figure 2). In Peru and Bolivia, legislation provides for fines and closures to be imposed on transportation companies that sell bus tickets to people with an irregular migration status.[39] This law has created a market for intermediaries and irregular transportation providers in which fares are well above standard rates –as much as four times higher in Bolivia, according to key informants. Additionally, some key informants noted that Haitian migrants are overcharged to a greater extent than those from other countries when paying for transportation services due to the language barriers they face, as they usually do not speak or understand Spanish.

In Tacna, there is evidence of a broad unregulated market for transportation services catering to migrants, both inside and outside the transport terminal. Key informants working along the Peru-Chile border reported the existence of unofficial transport "companies" that operate buses at night, often selling out all the available spots on their trips to less monitored crossing points.

Smugglers provide documents, but their services carry risks

A third (33%) of smuggler-using survey respondents reported that their smugglers had provided them with documents (see Figure 2). This service is common as documents are often damaged, lost or stolen during migration journeys[40] and Venezuelan migrants, especially, find them difficult to replace.[41] At the same time, Venezuelan ID cards—the most common documents among Venezuelans—do not feature holograms or other originality verification mechanisms, which makes them relatively easy to falsify. Fake Venezuelan ID cards are widely advertised on social media platforms.[42] Thus, of the 75 respondents who reported obtaining documents through a smuggler, 74 were Venezuelan, and only one was Colombian.

According to key informants, some smugglers in Peru offer to process official asylum applications online and to provide printed receipts, which can be used as temporary documents to overcome the prohibition irregular migrants face purchasing bus tickets. Such applications are often submitted without supporting evidence, which can delay or hinder access to international protection in Peru for those genuinely in need. Moreover, because it is common for smugglers not to disclose the email address used to file applications, those seeking asylum cannot file additional documents themselves. Key informants also noted that fraudulent applications tend to discredit legitimate cases in the eyes of immigration authorities. In addition, these practices contribute to congesting the country's refugee system.

Smugglers also provide other services including accommodation, negotiations with authorities, communication and money transfers

The provision of food or water by smugglers was reported by 50% of respondents, along with access to communication (15%) and accommodation (13%).

39 Presidency of the Republic of Peru (2024) Decreto Legislativo No. 1582. | Plurinational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia (2013) Ley No. 370.
40 MMC (2024e) Risks, dangers and assistance needs among migrants in South America.
41 The difficulties faced by Venezuelan migrants in obtaining identity documents were addressed in the section "Entry restrictions imposed on the Venezuelan population encourage the use of smugglers" of this text. Ver: Algarra, Á. (2021) Op. Cit. | MMC (2024d) Op. Cit.
42 These documents are widely and constantly offered on Facebook groups. A smaller and outdated offer was found on Instagram. MMC collected some of these posts to be consulted here.| See: Servicio Administrativo de Identificación, Migración y Extranjería. (2024) Instagram post from March 13, 2024.

Migrants who purchase "all-inclusive packages" are provided with guidance and transportation, accommodation in private homes or hotels, and, in some cases, meals. In Peru and Bolivia, hotels and other accommodation facilities that rent spaces to migrants with irregular migration status face sanctions.[43] Consequently, migrants who do not arrange "all-inclusive" deals and who cannot access shelters have to turn to intermediaries or end up sleeping on the streets.

Many of the migrants interviewed for this study mentioned negotiations between smugglers and immigration authorities to allow their passage through both official entry points and border trails. Likewise, almost a third (31%) of the survey respondents reported that their smugglers had negotiated their crossing with the authorities (see Figure 2).

> *"And the man who helped me cross the border [the smuggler] came to the front and spoke with the police. After a while, he signalled me and I walked with both my daughters, and the police took my ID and looked at me and my girls, and said, 'Go ahead'. But it was because they had given him [money]."*

Venezuelan woman, 47 years old, interviewed in Peru recalling her experience at the Ecuador-Peru border

According to the Cuban respondents, some migrants with "all-inclusive packages", particularly those from the Caribbean, receive SIM cards from their smugglers upon arrival in Guyana for use through South America. Of the 33 individuals who cited this smuggler service, 22 (67%) were Cuban. The remaining 11 individuals who reported acquiring this service were Venezuelan. The Venezuelan migrants interviewed for this study reported that in countries such as Peru and Chile, purchasing SIM cards requires a passport or regularisation documents, making it inaccessible to them. As a result, some turn to smugglers to obtain them.

Almost one in ten (9%) smuggler-using survey respondents sought help with making or receiving money transfers, which may be partly explained by the need to pay intermediaries for such services when faced with the loss or theft of official documents.[44]

2. Smugglers' profiles and modalities

> *"What we encounter is a broad variety of smuggling activities; it's a wide spectrum of smuggling operations that occur at the borders."*

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Previous studies have analysed the diversity of profiles and operational methods of those who fall under the category of "smugglers" in other contexts across the Americas.[45] Similarly, in the South American context, smuggling networks comprise a wide range of actors. This section examines the different smuggler profiles identified through qualitative data, including both local, informal smugglers, as well as more organised transnational smuggling networks.

Profile one: local smugglers who are primarily located in key transit areas, operating informally and in an improvised manner

Based on interviews with migrants and key informants, and as outlined previously, a large portion of smugglers operate in transit areas, where they are contacted *in situ* when migrants are unable to cross a border or at strategic stops, such as transport terminals in capital cities. These smugglers are often members of local communities or migrants themselves who have settled there with the vast majority comprising adult men spanning a wide age range.

43 Presidency of the Republic of Peru (2024) Op. Cit. | Plurinational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia (2013) Op. Cit.
44 Western Union (n.d.) Receive Money.
45 Aragón, E., Barrantes, M. and Álvarez, L (2023) Op. Cit. IOM and UNODC.

Those at the border swarm you like ants to sugar.

32-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Peru

According to the key informants interviewed, some of these smugglers were already involved in the transport sector before migration in their countries reached its current scale, working as motorcycle taxi operators, or professional drivers of taxis, cargo vehicles, river transport, or buses. The increase in migration prompted local community members and settled migrants in these areas to offer smuggling services to survive. In South American border areas where migrant smuggling services are widely available, government institutions often have a limited presence, and local economies are constrained, characterised by high rates of informality and low purchasing power. As a result, smuggler services have become a significant part of local livelihoods.[46]

While these types of smuggling operations have become more sophisticated and established regarding their routes and modus operandi, this type of smuggler usually runs an improvised operation service, with rates and payment methods adapted to the person who requests their services (see Table 1). Contact is established *in situ* at border points, or less commonly, some migrants contact these smugglers via WhatsApp or other social media platforms when someone they know recommends their services.

Fees for services from these kinds of smugglers vary significantly, even for crossing the same border, due to the *ad hoc* nature of these services - for help at the Aguas Verdes-Huaquillas crossing (see Map 2), migrants reported paying from USD1 to USD10 per person.[47] According to migrants interviewed, smugglers often open negotiations with a high rate and progressively lower it when evidence of the migrants' lack of funds is shown. Some migrants, unaware of the going rate, reportedly accept the first price offered.

Like the fees, payment methods are also flexible and vary. As well as cash (US dollars or local currency), local-level smugglers often accept food, cell phones, or hygiene products in return for their services. Some Venezuelan interviewees recounted compensating their smugglers with supplies donated by the International Organization for Migration and even a pair of shoes.

Some interviewees recounted episodes of theft, abandonment and physical violence by smugglers. Key informants said they had heard of cases where smugglers suggested women migrants pay for their services with sex.

Profile two: transnational smuggling networks offering "all-inclusive packages"

Migrants and key informants interviewed frequently mentioned smugglers who provide services in two or more countries along the route as part of an "all-inclusive package". These smugglers often present themselves as travel agencies and offer a wide range of services for the entire migration journey.

According to the information collected in the field, it is common for these smugglers to be Venezuelan nationals, offering their services in a "package" from the country of origin to the destination country (often Chile).[48] They have built a business around migration in a country where the economy is increasingly weak and constrained.[49]

As mentioned previously, only 11% of survey respondents who used a smuggler engaged them for their entire journey, potentially as part of an all-inclusive package. However, it is likely that this study was only able to capture a portion of this practice because migrants using these types of smuggling services do not typically stop at transit points where migrants were interviewed (see Limitations about sampling approach).

Human smuggling at this [Chacalluta] border has had diverse natures. Initially, it was just individuals giving directions, such as 'walk toward the light', 'follow the train's path', or 'walk along the edge of the beach', and taxis at the border charging solely for transportation. But later, more organised operations emerged because they were more profitable, and due to the increase in the number of people wanting to enter Chile irregularly,

46 Sánchez, G. (2024) Op. Cit. IOM | Schüttel, C, et. al. (2021) Apoyo a las comunidades de acogida de población migrante y refugiada en las zonas fronterizas de Colombia, Ecuador y Perú. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ. | Sánchez Serrano, R. (2018) Border Cities of Bolivia Socioeconomic Conditions and Social Welfare. Temas Sociales, no. 42, pp. 117-145.

47 Field observations, key informants, and Sánchez, G. (2024) Op. Cit. suggest the usual rate at this and other similar crossings is between USD0.5 and USD5.

48 IOM (2022a) Op. Cit.

49 Zegarra, G. (2024) Análisis | Cómo está la economía de Venezuela tras 11 años de Gobierno de Maduro. CNN

resulting from the implementation of the democratic responsibility visa.[50] *(...) That's when international smuggling networks began to form among Venezuelans, Colombians, Peruvians, Chileans, and Bolivians who knew where to cross, and rates were then established.*"

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"*Literally guides offer all types of services: transportation, border crossing. Nowadays, they provide transportation, a place to sleep, a place to rest, to shower. It's a full package.*"

Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes – Bolivia

Key informants highlighted that, over the past five years, migrant smuggling in the subcontinent has become increasingly organised. Rising migration, the closure of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the tightening of entry controls have led to greater sophistication and the establishment of a structured system of routes, rates, schedules, means of transport and other mechanisms.

Through a network of contacts at various points along the route, the services offered in these "packages" involve transportation from origin to destination, including transportation within countries of transit, guidance crossing borders and may also include accommodation, help carrying luggage, and food. Some interviewees reported that these "packages" do not include a success "guarantee" and that it is common for smugglers to abandon their *clients* after one or two failed attempts at crossing a border.

Smugglers providing transnational "package" deals often have fixed rates as a "travel agency" and offer a fixed price, with minor variations, to individuals seeking their services. Given that these offers include more than one service and a higher level of comfort, the rates are higher and vary from USD800 to USD1,800 for the Venezuela – Chile journey.[51] Rates depend on the length of the trip, the number of borders to cross, and the services engaged (see Table 1). These fees are usually paid in cash in US dollars in the country before departure, usually in Venezuela, or in instalments during the trip.

Some transnational-service smugglers accompany their *clients* all the way to their destination. Others guide migrants via WhatsApp, monitoring their location and giving directions about arrival points, lodging, and locations from where transportation or walking groups depart. In both cases, they have contacts and prior agreements with a service network in the countries along the route.

Although the expansion of such offers on social media platforms[52] has been observed, particularly in the context of migration to North America,[53] migrants interviewed who used transnational smuggling services in South America reported that the most common way to contact them is directly in the country of origin or through referrals from previous *clients*.

According to key informants, within this same transnational service model, there are also Venezuelan smugglers who offer services in Chile or other South American countries to facilitate return migration to Venezuela.

50 In June 2018, Chile ended visa-free entry for Venezuelan nationals and introduced the democratic responsibility visa.

51 According to information provided by migrants interviewed and documents from previous investigations, such as these: IOM (2022a) Op. Cit. | Verdejo, R. (2021) La ruta del tráfico de migrantes: 5.000 kilómetros entre coyotes. CIPER Chile.

52 IOM (2022a) Op. Cit.

53 Canal Laiton, X. et. al. (2024) Online communities: How do people on the move to North America use social media? Overview of the information shared by migrant populations in public Facebook groups. MMC and DISORLAB. | Medina, P. and Gonzales, C. (2024). Dolor, anuncios y videos en la dimensión digital del tráfico de migrantes. CLIP, Bellingcat, et. al.

Table 1. Comparison of key characteristics of local and transnational migrant smuggling operations in South America

Type of smugglers / Variables	Profile one: Local smuggling in transit areas	Profile two: Transnational smuggling services in "all-inclusive packages"
Services	**Common:** • Guide or transportation for border crossings • Motorised transportation to enter a country or move inland from a crossing point • Help with cargo **Less common:** • Providing (sometimes fraudulent) documents	**Common:** • Full motorised transportation for the entire journey • Guide or transportation for border crossings • Lodging • Help with cargo • Food and hydration **Less common:** • Help with processing international money transfers • Provision of fraudulent documents
Modes of contact	• In location where assistance is required • Less frequently, migrants contact smugglers directly (through WhatsApp or other social media platforms) following recommendations from acquaintances who have already used their services	• Face-to-face contact in country of origin • Generally known people or referenced by acquaintances who used their services previously
Rates / payments	• Varying rates depending on *clients'* resources and local conditions • Border crossing rates can be less than USD1 • Regular services with extra charges • Payments in any currency or in kind (with cell phones or food)	• Predetermined rates • Rates range from USD100 and USD1,800 (approx.) depending on the distance to be travelled, the number of borders to be crossed, the final destination and the services purchased • Cash payments in dollars before leaving or in instalments along the way
Risks / abuses	• Although it is not the norm, some of these smugglers may commit scams, theft, abandonment, physical violence and sexual violence • High levels of impunity: abuses can happen in front of or near the authorities without major repercussions	• These are not the norm, but these smugglers have committed abandonment and scams. This type of smuggler is associated with fewer cases of violence compared to other types

Source: Own elaboration based on interviews with migrants and key informants, as well as some secondary sources referenced along the text when the topic is discussed.

Other profiles: organised crime, local crime and corrupt actors in smuggling

Although none of this study's participants reported having encountered smugglers connected to organised crime[54] involved in drug trafficking and extortion, in countries along the route—such as Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru—their existence is extensively reported in migration literature.[55] This type of smugglers may offer border crossings or "all-inclusive" services in the countries where they are present and are intrinsically related to crimes such as theft, fraud, extortion, sexual violence and the delivery of migrants to human trafficking networks.[56] According to secondary sources, this type of smuggler is common in countries where armed groups or organised criminal groups exert territorial control, particularly between Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador.

On the other hand, according to the interviews, individuals or gangs involved in local crime, as opposed to transnational organised criminal networks, can also act as smugglers in border areas. Such smugglers are predominantly young men who offer services such as guiding migrants or negotiating with authorities to facilitate border crossings, often using intimidation and coercion. Following key informants' statements, it is common for these men to be physically and verbally violent and to commit crimes such as theft, assault, extortion and, to a lesser extent, sexual violence. This type of smuggler is common along the Aguas Verdes – Huaquillas border (see Map 2) and at the borders between Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, where low-level crime is common. Some migrants and key informants interviewed reported that, to intimidate, these local criminals can falsely present themselves as members of the *Tren de Aragua*, one of the largest organised crime networks in South America,[57] despite serious doubts about their connections.

> *"They [the migrants] name three types of smugglers (...) We start with the police, meaning those who are 'the law'. If they themselves do not uphold the law, what can we expect? It is true that not all [police officers] are like this, but this should be acknowledged and reported."*

Humanitarian NGO which asked to be quoted anonymously

Finally, some interviewed organisations reported cases of state officials (for example law enforcement and immigration officers) involved in the facilitation of smuggling by taking bribes to allow entry or point people to alternative routes for irregular entry.[58]

According to the accounts of interviewed migrants, this phenomenon occurs most frequently at exit points in Peru and Bolivia, where state officials are reportedly involved in facilitating entry to Chile. Among the 805 surveyed individuals who reported having contact with state officials, 32% indicated that they had to pay a bribe.

54 In the South American context, there is a remarkable difference between two categories of crime and criminals: common crime and organised crime. Common crime or local crime refers to isolated criminal acts committed by individuals or small groups without an organised structure, such as petty theft or other violent offences. In contrast, organised crime involves structured criminal networks operating across multiple countries and engaging in various illicit activities, including human, drugs and arms trafficking, as well as money laundering. These organisations have defined hierarchies, long-term strategies, and operational models similar to legitimate businesses, aiming to maximise profits and minimise risks. See: Cuanalo Navarrete, B. (2024) Estudio criminológico sobre la delincuencia común y el crimen organizado en México. Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

55 IOM (2022a) Op. Cit. | Sánchez, G. (2024) Op. Cit. OIM | Sampó, C. and Troncoso, V. (2024) Tren de Aragua: The Transnacionalization of Organized Crime through Migrant Smuggling. Análisis Político, vol. 37, no. 108, 147-176. | Isacson, A. (2024) Migrants in Colombia: Between government absence and criminal control. WOLA.

56 IOM (2022a) Op. Cit.

57 About the Tren de Aragua, see: InSight Crime (2024) Tren de Aragua.

58 Taking bribes and indicating clear paths for entry in exchange for money are actions that fit within MMC's definition of migrant smuggling. | Regarding bribery incidents in some countries in the region, see: ProLAC, DRC, NRC & Encuentros (2024) Monitoreo de protección regional - Colombia, Ecuador, México, Panamá, Perú, Venezuela. Noviembre 2023 a agosto 2024.

3. Migrant perceptions of smugglers

> *Migrants say, 'For you they're bad, but smugglers are necessary for us.' So people don't obey you if you say, 'The smugglers are dangerous'; they say, 'No, they are not dangerous.' And they are not dangerous! Smugglers are also good people. They are not evil. They help them. (...) They are very similar to migrants as people, and they know the people's suffering very well.*

Humanitarian NGO which asked to be quoted anonymously

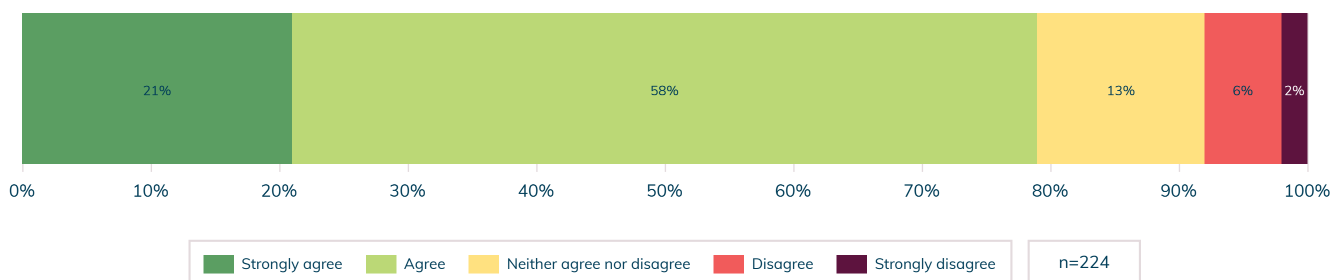
Migrants' perceptions of smugglers vary depending on the multiplicity of profiles and modes of operation. This section explores the wide range of perceptions that migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean have about smugglers in South America.

The predominant perception of smugglers among migrants is neutral

Most migrants surveyed and interviewed who used smugglers held a neutral perception of them. They viewed them merely as service providers, as actors with whom they established a primarily transactional relationship, whose work enabled them to achieve their migration goals. Most (79%) of the 224 survey respondents who used smugglers agreed or strongly agreed that the smugglers they hired helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country (see Figure 3).[59]

Figure 3. Satisfaction of those who used smugglers

Responses to 4Mi survey question: "How much do you agree with the following statement? 'The smuggler or smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country'"



Negative perceptions of smugglers involve abuse and deception

> *We bought a so called 'package' from Colombia to Chile, but things never turn out as expected. That [smuggler] was the one who attempted the first and second crossings when the PDI [Chilean Investigative Police] caught us. Then, after that, they told us that there was nothing else we could do because the package had been used up. I mean, it was not our fault, and they were so irresponsible!*

Venezuelan woman, 38 years old, interviewed in Chile

59 This percentage is significantly higher than the findings of a study on smuggler use in migration routes to North America (56%). See: Canal Laiton, X. (2024) Op. Cit. MMC.

"When we crossed it was two in the afternoon. My sister-in-law, the children, and I crossed first, and they [the smugglers] told us: 'wait for us here'. And we waited for them and for the guys [my spouse and my brother], and we waited and waited. When the guys arrived, they were all beaten. I asked, 'What happened?' They were beaten, and all their money was taken. They [the smugglers] stole all their money!"

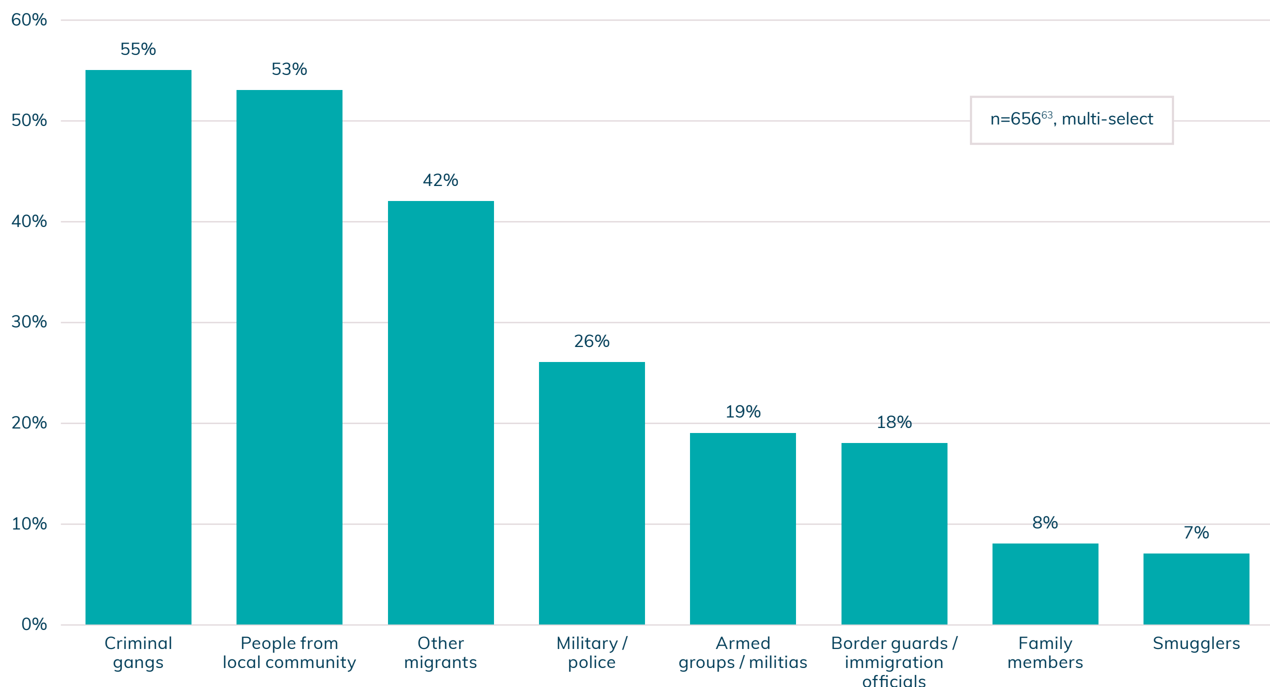
Venezuelan woman, 19 years old, interviewed in Peru

Migrants interviewed for this study attributed their negative perceptions of smugglers to incidents of abuse they had experienced, such as theft, fraud, deliberate deception, or abandonment.

Among all respondents, 7% identified smugglers as possible perpetrators of abuse in the most dangerous location of the route.[60] Those who employed smugglers identified them more frequently as potential perpetrators (15%, n=181) than those who did not hire them (4%, n=475).[61] However, it is worth noting that smugglers were the least frequently mentioned actor by the two subgroups among the options listed in the survey (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Perceived perpetrators of abuse

Responses to the 4Mi survey question: "Who were likely to be perpetrating such incidents in [the place you identified as the most dangerous location]?"



60 The survey question about likely perpetrators of abuse was answered by 656 people who identified at least one "most dangerous" place on their route to the survey location.

61 The subgroup of 656 persons previously described consists of 181 respondents who employed smugglers and 475 who did not. Respectively, 28 of the 181 migrants surveyed who had used smugglers (15%) and 17 of the 475 who had not used them (4%) identified smugglers as potential perpetrators.

62 The percentages represent the proportion of respondents who identified the actors shown in Figure 4 as potential perpetrators of abuses at the most dangerous locations of their migratory journey. Respondents could select more than one option for this question.

Thirteen percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers”, while 8% indicated that their smugglers did *not* help them achieve their migration goal (see Figure 3). This could be linked to the known episodes of abandonment of migrants who were not transported to another country by their smugglers, as highlighted by the interviewed migrants.

Almost a third of the surveyed migrants who did not employ smugglers (31%, n=905) said they avoided them to protect themselves from abuse and crime on their journey. Similarly, some migrant interviewees who did not use smugglers explained this by saying they considered smugglers to be scammers who took advantage of their needs.

Positive perceptions include protection and support

Migration journeys through South America involve constant dangers, although those vary depending on the routes taken.[63] Almost half (47%) of the 1,129 persons surveyed for this study stated they had experienced at least one incident during their journey, indicating the high level of exposure to risks that migrants face in South America. In response, migrants adopt various strategies to protect themselves, including, for some, hiring smugglers. More than one-fifth (22%) of smuggler-using survey respondents reported they viewed smugglers as a form of protection along the migration route.

Most of the interviewed migrants who expressed a positive perception of smugglers had purchased “all-inclusive” transnational services. They stated that, in addition to the potential protection smugglers could provide, they were people known to them or close to their social circle who were concerned about the wellbeing of their travel group, and who helped them with their luggage or with unforeseen situations, such as illness or injury, especially when there were children present in the group.

63 MMC (2024e) Op. Cit.

Conclusions and policy implications

To develop an evidence-based and effective response to migration that prioritises the protection of migrants, it is essential to debunk common myths and approach the issue with factual accuracy. This requires addressing both the theoretical and practical aspects of "migrant smuggling," a topic often clouded by misconceptions and misinformation.

This study has shown that the use of smugglers on South American migration routes remains relatively low. Only a minority of migrants—around one-fifth of respondents—report resorting to smuggling services. An awareness that smuggler use is the exception rather than the norm and knowledge of the reasons that contribute to its limited prevalence—freedom of movement under regional agreements, established migrant networks, familiarity with well-trodden migration routes, and limited financial capacity—can help decision-makers and humanitarian actors direct their efforts towards sustaining this trend.

To achieve this, it is key to uphold pathways for regular entry, such as those available under CAN and MERCOSUR for most nationalities except Venezuelans, and to implement the regional commitments made under the Los Angeles Declaration to foster regular, safe and orderly migration.[64]

Despite the overall low reliance on smugglers, this study has identified key factors that promote their use and could contribute to its increase in the future if not addressed. Smuggler use is higher among Venezuelan respondents due to entry restrictions imposed on them. Re-establishing regular pathways for this nationality, which continues to constitute the largest migration movement in the region, could further reduce their need to turn into smugglers.

Moreover, this paper has also shown that smuggler use tends to rise along routes leading to countries with more restrictive entry policies, such as Peru and Chile. If limiting the use of smugglers is a priority, reducing restrictive measures should be considered. Adopting a human rights and regularisation-based approach to migration—rather than one centred on security—would be the most effective way to curb reliance on smugglers and promote safer migration processes. Moreover, guaranteeing migrants' access to in-country transportation would further decrease their dependence on smugglers.

The smuggling landscape in South America is diverse, comprising two main profiles of smugglers: 1) local community members or settled migrants offering short-distance services in high-transit areas as a means of subsistence, and 2) individuals or networks providing transnational all-inclusive services, often originating from Venezuela. Migrants' perceptions of smugglers also vary. Most migrants participating in this study viewed them merely as service providers, some as fraudsters or thieves, while others perceived them as protectors along the route.

Importantly, there is little evidence to suggest that smugglers are systematically involved in crimes against migrants, and fewer than one in ten respondents identified them as potential perpetrators of violence. Policies aimed at combatting migrant smuggling should, therefore, avoid broad generalisations that link smuggling with organised crime. Instead, law enforcement efforts should focus on addressing actual crimes against migrants and target the perpetrators of these crimes—regardless of whether they are involved in smuggling or not—in line with national legal frameworks while safeguarding migrants' rights and dignity.

The impact of recent executive orders in the United States—which have restricted regular migration pathways and increased deportations to Latin America[65]—on migration trends and smuggler use dynamics in South America remains uncertain. However, both outward movements from South American countries and South-South migration will likely continue, with the latter potentially intensifying as some people, unable to reach the U.S., seek alternative destinations within the subcontinent. In the context of increasingly restrictive migration policies across South American countries and the persistent need to migrate, reliance on smugglers along southern routes may grow. Reducing barriers to regular migration transit will be key to mitigating this risk and promoting safer migration.

64 Los Angeles Declaration (n.d.) About Los Angeles Declaration. | Except for Bolivia and Venezuela, all countries in South America have endorsed the Declaration. See: Los Angeles Declaration (n.d.) Endorsing countries.

65 WOLA (2025) Trump's Executive Orders and Latin America: Key Things to Know. | WOLA (2025) By Terminating Legal Pathways, the U.S. Is Abandoning Venezuelans.

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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