

MIGRANT SMUGGLING FROM NIGERIA

Research findings on Migrant Smuggling of Nigerians

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants First Edition | September 2022



**MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK**



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Every year, millions of people regularly cross Nigeria's borders; Nigerians emigrate abroad, and foreign citizens migrate to Nigeria for education, work or family reunification. A small proportion of Nigerians on the move are smuggled along various land, sea and air routes. This StoryMap is based on extensive field research conducted during 2019-2021, triangulated and validated with statistics and secondary literature, to provide a policy-oriented and actionable analysis of migrant smuggling from, to and through Nigeria.

Context

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with more than 216 million inhabitants.¹ The country comprises 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Forty per cent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line of US\$1.93 per person per day (2011 PPP, as of 2018/2019), and a further 25% are vulnerable to falling into poverty (1-1.5 times the poverty line).² Over three million people are internally displaced within the country.³

The [UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#) carried out three phases of field research on migrant smuggling from, through and to Nigeria (for more details, see [Methodology](#) section), and analyzed and triangulated the field research findings with data and research from the Nigerian authorities, international and regional organizations, and relevant academic research.

Field Research Phases

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Time Period	November 2019	April to July 2021	April to December 2021
Location	Edo, Imo, Kano, and Lagos States, Nigeria	Adamawa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Kano, and Osun States and FCT (Abuja), Nigeria	Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Tunisia
Method	Qualitative in-depth interviews	Qualitative in-depth interviews	Surveys
Nigerian Migrants	37	38	746
Key Informants	39	84	-
Total	76	122	746

This research focuses on migrant smuggling of Nigerians to and through West and North Africa, and to Southern Europe. Smuggling of Nigerians on other routes, and smuggling of people of other nationalities to and through Nigeria, is also analyzed, but in less detail than smuggling of Nigerians through West and North Africa, due to the availability of data and information.

1. Migrant smuggling Routes

Migrant smuggling routes by land and sea lead from Nigeria to other parts of West Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa, North Africa and Europe, while air smuggling routes lead to Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and North America. Smuggling of migrants from Nigeria by air is more likely to involve offences related to document fraud.

Most of the 746 Nigerians surveyed in 2021 along land routes in West and North Africa for this research stated that their intended final destinations were: Italy, Germany, Libya, Niger, Algeria, the UK, Mali, and the USA.⁴

[OPEN THE MAP](#)

By Land to West and North Africa

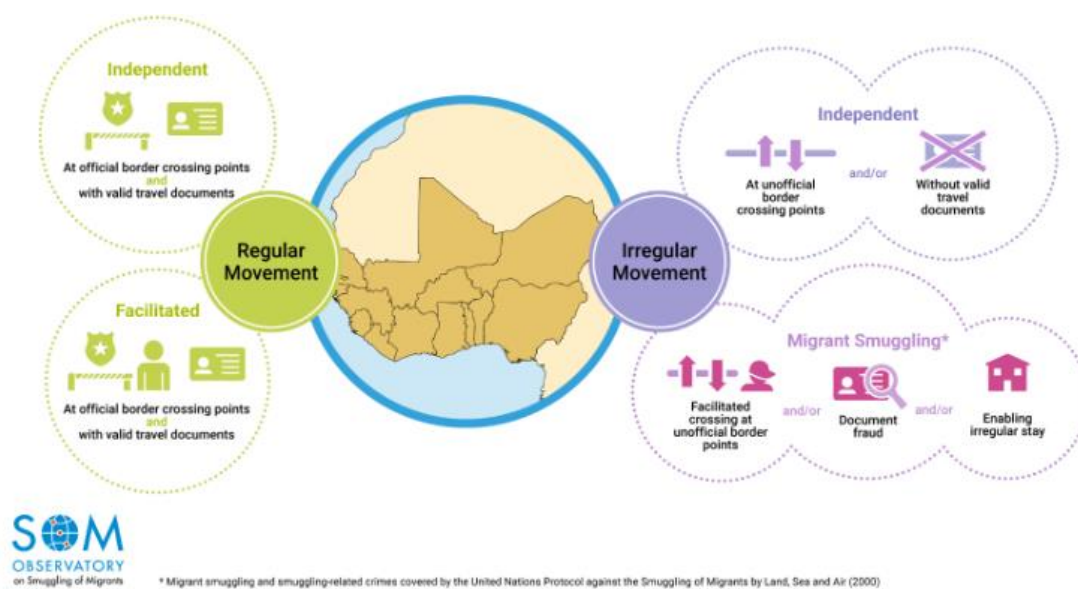
As citizens of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),⁵ Nigerians have the right to enter and reside in another ECOWAS Member State for 90 days without requiring a visa, provided that they cross at an official border crossing point with the required travel documents. However, ECOWAS Member States can restrict free movement according to national provisions on “inadmissible immigrants.” In recent years, “*West African states have invoked the exception for “inadmissible immigrants” so often that a number of states now apply it practically as a matter of routine*”.⁶

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, among other issues, as of mid-2020, 66% of the 352 border crossing points within the ECOWAS sub-region were closed, and a further 26% were open only for transportation of goods and/or returning nationals.⁷ Three-quarters of Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries in 2021 said that the pandemic had impacted their migration trajectories; in particular that their migration journey had become more difficult because of border restrictions and that the pandemic had increased the existing risks of migration. One in six of those who reported an impact were stuck at the survey location due to the pandemic, and one in eight no longer had the resources to finance their journey.

Because of their ECOWAS free movement rights, Nigerians' journeys through West and North Africa often involve both smuggling of migrants and regular cross-border travel. The [UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#) refers to “smugglers” when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the [UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#). The word “facilitator” is used whenever the elements of: (a) facilitation of irregular entry; and/or (b) financial or material benefit, can reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence.⁸

Two-thirds (14/21) of the Nigerians interviewed in Nigeria in 2021 had started their journey with valid travel documents. They mentioned that the first step in their travel preparation was obtaining a passport from the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), indicating an intention to travel regularly, at least through the ECOWAS sub-region. Despite this, these interviewees had been smuggled within West Africa or from West Africa to North Africa.

Nigerians use smugglers within the ECOWAS sub-region because dangers along the routes, in the form of violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors, complicate free mobility.⁹ Border authorities are not always fully aware of ECOWAS free movement rights and some may demand bribes. The migration and smuggling market is occupied by a plurality of actors, some of whom provide regular travel services, while others perpetrate migrant smuggling offences, some acting as part of a transnational organized crime group.



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Nigerians from all over the country, embarking on migration journeys north overland, gather in the cities of Kano, Kaduna, or Sokoto in the North-West zone of Nigeria. These cities function as hubs for organizing onward journeys, whether regular and independent; regular and facilitated; irregular and independent; irregular and facilitated for no financial or material benefit; or smuggled by criminal actors. From there, Nigerians cross the border into Niger Republic from the Nigerian States of Katsina, Jigawa or Sokoto, also in the North-West zone. From Niger, they exit the ECOWAS Free Movement Area and enter Libya or Algeria. Surveys conducted among migrants and refugees in Libya indicate that the majority use “travel facilitators” (smugglers and facilitators), with Nigerians relying more on smugglers than other migrants and refugees.¹⁰

GEOPOLITICAL ZONES AND STATES IN NIGERIA

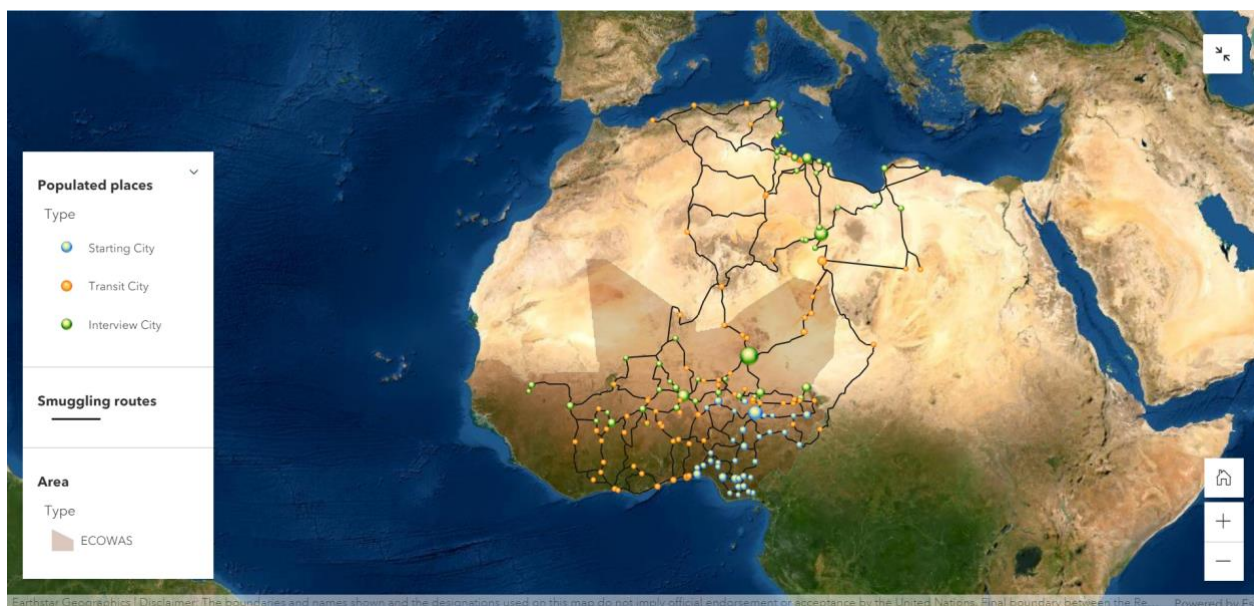


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The other main overland smuggling route for Nigerians migrating to North Africa and Europe is through neighboring Benin Republic, though it is far less commonly used for smuggling than the route through Niger Republic. People cross the border at Seme, Lagos State, in the South-West zone of Nigeria, into Benin. A Nigerian man interviewed in Lagos in 2019 used this route, at the suggestion of his smuggler, “a specialist on the Cotonou [Benin] route, which he used to connect us to Sabha, Libya.” From Benin, Nigerians are smuggled through Burkina Faso to Mali or Niger, and travel onwards from there to Libya or Algeria.

The number of Nigerians smuggled to Morocco - through Mali, Mauritania and Algeria - is far lower, and few Nigerians were recorded as using the [Western Mediterranean](#) and [Northwest African \(Atlantic\)](#) routes to Spain in recent years.¹¹

Routes of Nigerians Surveyed from Place of Departure to Place of Interview, including transit point



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre during 2021 with Nigerians on the move in Burkina Faso (62), Libya (299), Mali (72), Niger (250) and Tunisia (63), in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

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By Land and Sea to Central and Southern Africa

Some Nigerians are smuggled to Cameroon, either overland from Cross River State, or by sea from Akwa Ibom State, in the South-South zone of Nigeria, despite provisions for visa-free travel between Nigeria and Cameroon. Smugglers transport Nigerians to Cameroon, or through Cameroon to Gabon and onwards to other destinations in Central and Southern Africa, sometimes with the collusion of security personnel and ferry operators. According to a key informant interviewed in Imo State in the South-East in 2019: *“The information that we have so far has shown that while some of them stay permanently in [Gabon], the majority of them do find their ways to Europe and South Africa using different [travel] documents”*.

Nigerians are among the largest and longest established immigrant communities in South Africa, and most arrive regularly by air with a tourist visa. Nigerians are the fifth largest nationality applying for permanent residency in South Africa, with 7,590 applications between 2014 and 2019.¹² According to the Government of South Africa, there are an increasing number of fraudulent applications for permanent residence in the country by people of various nationalities, some of which may be procured on behalf of migrants by smugglers committing document fraud offences. Other Nigerians move on from South Africa to Australia, USA, UK, Canada and Japan, as a response to current conditions or as part of their original migration plans.¹³

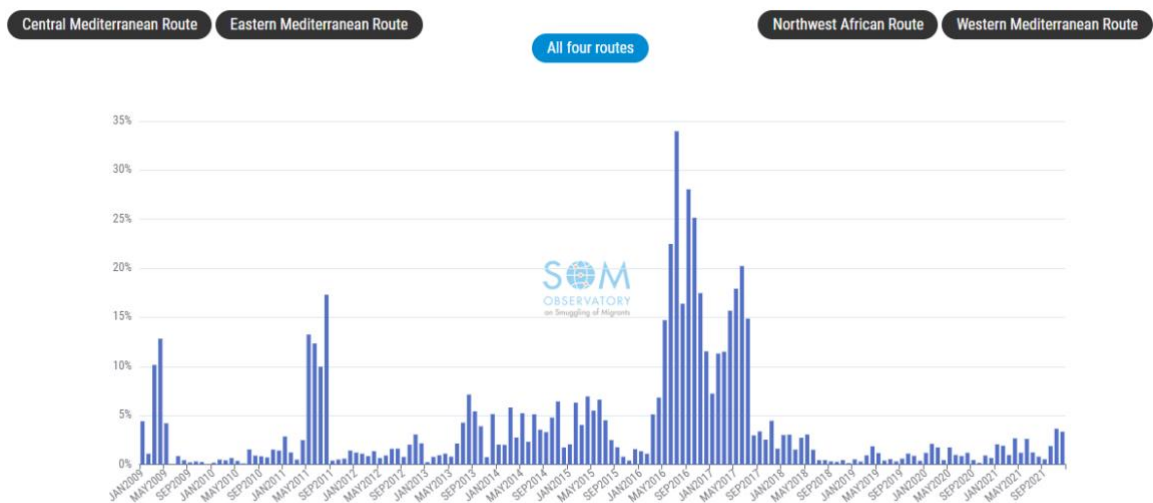
By Sea to Europe

In 2017, 18,260 Nigerians arrived irregularly by land and sea in Europe, representing the largest group by nationality that year. However, every year since then, Nigerians have not featured in the top ten. Of 146,480 people who arrived irregularly by sea and land to Europe during 2021, the four largest groups were North African (Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians and Egyptians), followed by Bangladeshis.¹⁴ During 2021, just 1,912 Nigerians attempted to irregularly enter Europe by land and sea.¹⁵

Among the sea routes to Europe, prior to 2021, most Nigerians used the [Central Mediterranean Route](#) from Libya or Tunisia to Italy – almost exclusively during 2015-2017: 99% of Nigerians (78,141 people) used the Central Mediterranean. During 2018-2020, of 3,151 Nigerians who irregularly entered Europe by sea and land, 65% used the Central Mediterranean Route, 29% the Eastern Mediterranean and 6% the Western Mediterranean.

During 2021, however, the majority of Nigerians entering the EU irregularly (60%) arrived by land from Türkiye to Bulgaria and Greece (Eastern Mediterranean land route), while 38% arrived by sea on the Central Mediterranean. During 2022 (up to end May), a total of 3,207 Nigerians were detected irregularly entering an EU country, with 83% using the Eastern Mediterranean route, 16% the Central Mediterranean and 1% the [Northwest African \(Atlantic\) route](#) to the Canary Islands, Spain.¹⁶

Share of Nigerians Compared to Other Nationalities Across Western Mediterranean Route, Central Mediterranean Route, Eastern Mediterranean Route, Northwest African Route and All four routes from 2009 – 2021



Source: UNODC Observatory calculations based on Frontex data

The decline in the number of Nigerians arriving along these routes does not necessarily signal a diminished demand for smuggler-facilitated journeys. 32,049 Nigerians were present in Libya as of the end of April 2022. Though no disaggregated figures are available for Nigerians, among the general migrant population in Libya, of whom Nigerians comprise around 5%, three-quarters are adult men, 12% are adult women, 8% are accompanied children and 6% are unaccompanied children.¹⁷ Those who wish to travel onwards to Europe have limited options due to [increased border controls and interceptions on the Central Mediterranean Route](#). This has resulted in the partial displacement to the Eastern Mediterranean land route referred to above.

Smuggling of Nigerians by air

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, and the European Union Law Enforcement Agency, Europol, recorded increasing numbers of Nigerians arriving by air at European airports with fraudulent travel documents in 2019.¹⁸ During 2020, the latest year for which figures are available, a total of 3,719 fraudulent document users were detected across the EU, as compared to 5,228 in 2019. However, Nigerians were not among the top three nationalities of people detected using fraudulent documents (Ukrainians, Albanians and Turkish). Frontex points to the use of airports in Istanbul, Türkiye and Casablanca, Morocco, as stop-overs on the way to European airports.¹⁹ However, limited information is available in relation to smuggling by air, and the Observatory did not conduct field research at airports.

A mix of licit and illicit actors and activities is evident also in the context of regular and irregular, smuggler-facilitated migration by air from Nigeria to the Middle East. Registered travel agents, particularly in the North-West zone of Nigeria, procure visas and intermediate jobs in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Lebanon and Jordan. In some cases this may constitute smuggling of migrants and related offences. According to key informants interviewed in Kano in the North-West, these Nigerian agents collaborate with agents in the destination countries.

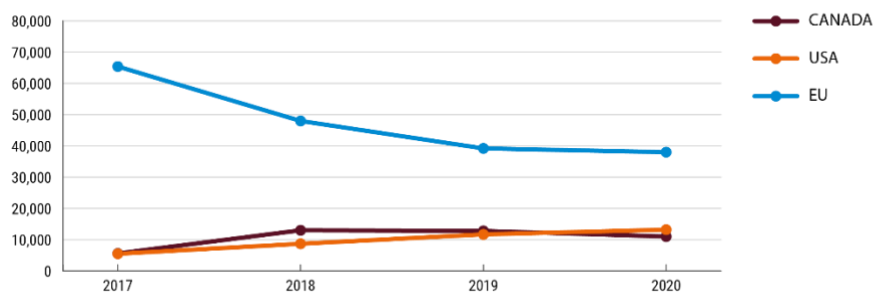
Some work permits and visas for countries in the Middle East are applied for fraudulently by smugglers. Other Nigerians enter with a short-term visa and remain and work undocumented, which may in some cases involve the offence of enabling irregular stay for a profit. Irregular immigration status arises from the expiration of a visa, breaching the conditions of a visa, or leaving the designated employer under *kafala*. *Kafala* ("sponsorship") systems in the Middle East stipulate that the migrant worker is tied to an employer, leading to irregularity if they leave that employment.²⁰

Nigerian press reports in mid-2021 indicate that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stopped issuing work visas to Nigerians, ostensibly due to COVID-19-related restrictions, but reportedly as a result of violent clashes in Sharjah, UAE, involving Nigerian cult groups Supreme Eiyé Confraternity, Black Axe and Aro Mate (Barggas).²¹ During these months, smuggling of migrants and related offences (document fraud and enabling irregular stay) may have been more common. In September 2021, the suspension was lifted.

Applications for international protection by Nigerians can, with certain caveats, be used as a proxy indicator for smuggling by air, though applications may not be lodged in the same year that applicants arrive in the country of destination. Some asylum applicants are smuggled to the country where the application is lodged.

An increase in the numbers of applications by Nigerians has been registered in Canada and USA in recent years, as well as in the Middle East and Australia, at the same time as a decrease in applications in the EU (see graph below).²² A small number of Nigerians also apply for asylum in North African countries, after arriving by air, land or sea, with totals for the period 2018–mid-2020 of 629 in Morocco, 307 in Algeria and 54 in Tunisia.²³

ASYLUM APPLICATIONS BY NIGERIANS, 2017-2020, IN EU, USA, AND CANADA



Source: UNODC Observatory calculations based on UNHCR data

Smuggling into and through Nigeria

The Observatory obtained limited information on smuggling into and through Nigeria, specifically in relation to Cameroonians, Chadians and Central Africans (CAR). Despite provisions for visa-free entry and tourist e-visa on arrival in Nigeria, citizens of these two countries may be smuggled into Nigeria, as a destination country, or through Nigeria, *en route* elsewhere. They are smuggled into the South-East zone of Nigeria from Cameroon. The Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) records 782 migrants from Niger deported or repatriated from Nigeria in 2020 (680 male and 102 female); 226 Beninese people (122 female and 104 male); 31 Togolese (19 male and 12 female); 12 Chadians (8 male and 4 female); and 11 Cameroonians (7 male and 4 female).

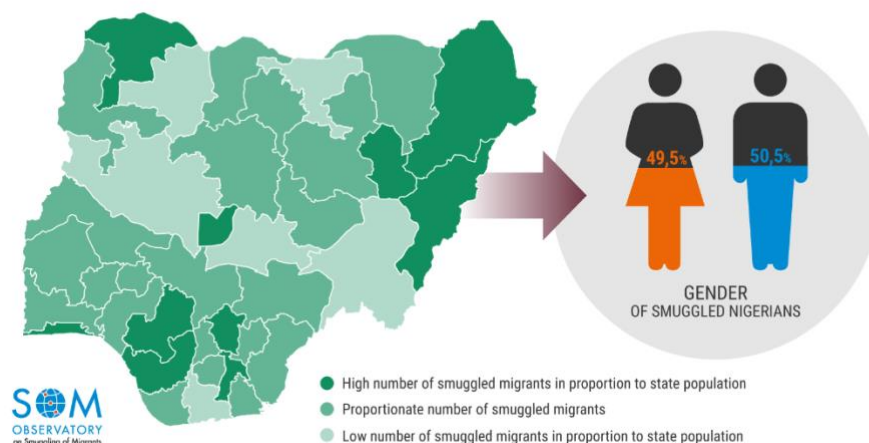
Central Africans in transit through Nigeria are smuggled along the same routes as Nigerians to and through West and North Africa, and Europe. A Nigerian man interviewed in Delta State in 2021 stayed in informal accommodation in a village on the Niger side of the Nigeria-Niger border for ten days while a group that included fellow Nigerians, Cameroonians, Senegalese and Gambians was assembled for the onward journey to Agadez, Niger.

2. Smuggling demand

Profiles of smuggled Nigerians

STATE OF ORIGIN AND GENDER OF NIGERIAN SURVEY RESPONDENTS WHO USED SMUGGLERS

Smuggled Nigerians surveyed, according to state of origin, compared to overall state population



Source: UNODC calculations based on [4Mi surveys](#) conducted by [Mixed Migration Centre \(MMC\)](#) during 2021 with Nigerians on the move in Burkina Faso (62), Libya (299), Mali (72), Niger (250) and Tunisia (63), in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. Since most smuggled people are men, additional efforts were made to survey women, in order to better understand their experiences of migrant smuggling. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

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Most Nigerians who are smuggled are men, though Nigerian women, girls, and boys are also smuggled, in smaller numbers.²⁴ Based on the qualitative interviews conducted during Phases 1 and 2 of this research, smuggled Nigerians are usually 16-35 years old, though there is evidence of Nigerians as young as eight and as old as 63 being smuggled. The age and gender profiles of smuggled Nigerians have implications for their experiences of smuggling, particularly aggravated smuggling offences and other abuses in the context of smuggling (see section on [Abuses](#)).

Although not a representative sample, among Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries in 2021, there were relatively higher numbers of people from the South-South zone in proportion to the state populations, particularly Edo and Delta States, as well as Lagos State in the South West. Disproportionately higher numbers of Nigerians were also surveyed from the North East (especially Borno, Adamawa and Gombe), the North West (Sokoto), and the South East (Abia and Enugu). However, Nigerians surveyed originated from almost every state in the Federation.

Drivers of Migrant Smuggling

Nigerians on the move surveyed for the Observatory in 2021 were asked about their use of smugglers and travel facilitators. Seventy-five per cent stated that they had planned to use smugglers or travel facilitators when they were preparing for their journey, as compared to 21% who said they had not planned to do so. Eighty-five per cent had in practice used at least one smuggler or facilitator for their journey. They did so for various different reasons, indicating the main drivers of migrant smuggling among Nigerians on the move.

Many Nigerians use smugglers because they are motivated to migrate and they do not have access to safe and legal migration alternatives or are not aware of those that are available. An intending migrant interviewed in Edo State in 2021 described his perception of the possibilities for regular travel:

“These days in Europe and in other Western countries, Nigerians are discriminated against [...]. This kind of discrimination shows up in the difficulties associated with getting a visa. It is so difficult to get a visa to travel out of Nigeria and that is why many people opt for the irregular route by travelling through the desert.”

Thirty per cent of Nigerians surveyed in 2021 considered that there was no alternative to being smuggled, in order to achieve their migration goals. Some of those surveyed (37%) considered other options before leaving Nigeria, including looking for a better job (72%), moving to a new city (internal migration) (60%), or starting a business (33%). About 18% of this group tried fleeing to a place of safety within their country (internal refuge) and 13% tried to migrate abroad regularly.

Using a smuggler is often perceived as cheaper and easier than independent irregular travel, particularly due to the incidence of bribery along the route. Over one-third of Nigerians surveyed who had used a smuggler or facilitator did so because they thought it would be easier (36%) and one-quarter (25%) because they thought it would be cheaper than travelling independently. As a key informant interviewed in Osun State in 2021 put it: *“It might be due to lack of travel documents or the need to spend less money on border officials.”*

The presence of non-state armed actors outside of Nigeria, and especially on routes from Niger to Libya, demanding protection money from those who travel through territory they control, or claim to control, also necessitates the use of migrant smugglers. A Nigerian man interviewed in Delta State in 2021 described how even within Nigeria, intending migrants avoid regular routes through the North of country to the Niger border, due to security risks.

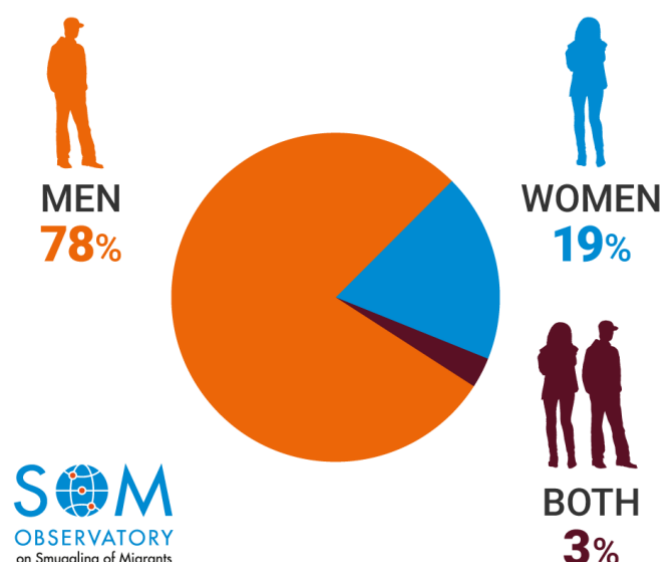
Smugglers do not necessarily protect Nigerians from such risks (see [Abuses](#) section below), but the conditions of travel and abuses experienced along the way do not act as a deterrent. Many Nigerians interviewed in 2019 and 2021 stated that they were aware of the risks and conditions - including women who were aware of the risks of sexual violence -, but still decided to embark on a smuggling journey. Some returned Nigerian migrants were intending to try again. When asked whether they would have started the journey knowing what they did now, 62% of Nigerians surveyed in 2021 said yes, 23% said no and 15% were undecided. Similarly, 49% stated that they were very likely or likely to encourage others to migrate as they did, 20% were neutral, and 31% said they were unlikely or very unlikely to do so.

Seventy-two per cent of Nigerians surveyed said that someone or something influenced their decision to migrate, but just 9% of that group cited smugglers as the most important influence. Community networks were far more important, with 84% citing family and friends in Nigeria or abroad as the most important influence. Social media plays an extremely limited role, with just 1% mentioning this as an influence. However, once they are on the move, migrants become increasingly dependent on smugglers for information and decision-making on routes and means of transport. ²⁵

3. Smugglers

Who are the smugglers?

GENDER OF SMUGGLERS, AS REPORTED BY SURVEYED NIGERIANS



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) during 2021 with Nigerians on the move, in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

Most smugglers of Nigerians on the various routes are men, with Nigerians surveyed in 2021 indicating that around one in five smugglers are women. ²⁶ This is a higher proportion of female smugglers compared to smuggling of people of other nationalities. Key informants interviewed in Nigeria in 2019 and 2021 referred to both male and female smugglers. Women carry out specific roles in migrant smuggling of Nigerians, usually at a lower level in the hierarchy (e.g.

local agents identifying clients; providing accommodation), as is the case in migrant smuggling in other regions.²⁷

However, most local agents organizing regular and irregular journeys to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan are Nigerian men, often with office premises in Kano and other cities in the North-West zone.

The ages of smugglers vary, though few, if any, children are involved (under 18 years). While many offenders are in their twenties, some are older, aged 30-60 years, according to interviewees in Nigeria. Perpetrators of smuggling from Nigeria, and of Nigerians in transit countries, are commonly of Nigerian nationality. However, in some cases, Nigerian smugglers work in coordination with Cameroonians, or other West Africans (from Benin, Ghana, Niger, Senegal, and Togo).

Modus Operandi of Smugglers

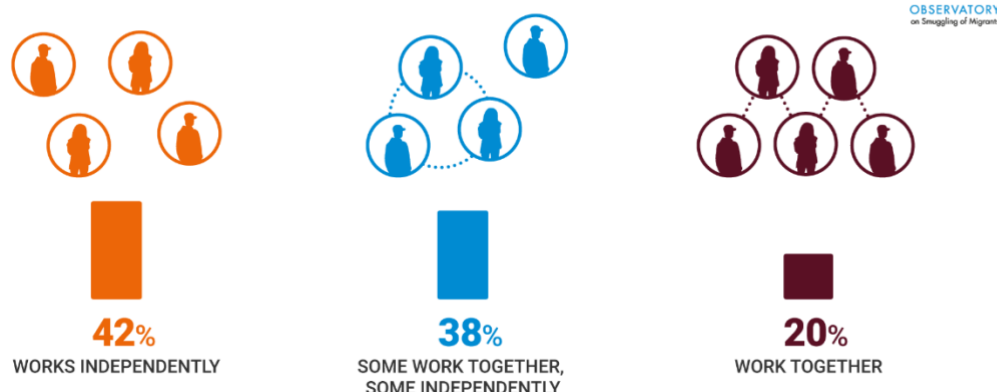
Smuggling from Nigeria, and of Nigerians in transit countries, is perpetrated by various different actors, located somewhere along a spectrum that ranges from highly organized and sophisticated to low-level individual perpetrators making *ad hoc* connections.²⁸ Law enforcement officers interviewed in Nigeria in 2021 and 2019 had experience with larger smuggling groups, involving up to fourteen perpetrators, with distinct hierarchies. Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) refers to well-developed networks of Nigerian smugglers operating on mixed migration routes and collaborating regularly with European organized crime groups.²⁹

Some smuggled Nigerians interviewed during Phases 1 and 2 of this research also described being in contact with smugglers based in European countries or in Libya through local agents working in their states of origin in Nigeria. Indeed, the difficulty of travelling through Libya has contributed to networks being increasingly organized, though the sea crossing across the [Central Mediterranean](#) involves a different group of smuggling actors to smuggling by land.³⁰ Recent research by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) in West and North Africa finds that most smugglers work as part of a network, with some coordinating travel all the way from the point of origin to Europe, while others rely on looser connections with other smugglers.³¹

From the perspective of many smuggled Nigerians themselves, however, smuggling is based on more *ad-hoc* arrangements, which corresponds with much of the academic literature on the topic.³² This difference in perspective is described by a Nigerian investigator interviewed in Imo State in the South East in 2021: “[smugglers] *operate in proxy whereby a trolley [guide] stands in between the smuggler and the migrant [...], but the actual smuggler’s identity would never be revealed.*”

Among Nigerians surveyed in West and North Africa in 2021 who used a smuggler or facilitator, 53% interacted with one smuggler or facilitator for the entire journey, with others using a smuggler or facilitator for part of the journey (31%) or interacting with several smugglers and/or facilitators for different parts of the journey (16%). Of the Nigerians surveyed who had used multiple smugglers and/or facilitators, the perceptions of whether these actors worked in groups or independently varied (see infographic).

LEVELS OF ORGANIZATION OF SMUGGLERS, AS REPORTED BY SURVEYED NIGERIANS



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by MMC during 2021 with Nigerians on the move, in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

Where multiple smugglers are involved in perpetrating smuggling offences, they carry out distinct roles at different levels of the group: local agents who make the first contact with intending migrants; transporters; accommodation providers; providers of fraudulent travel documents; dealing with the authorities (including requests for bribes) on migrants' behalf; and "connection men" or coordinators, who organize the smuggling group.

SERVICES OFFERED BY SMUGGLERS AND FACILITATORS



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by MMC during 2021 with Nigerians on the move, in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

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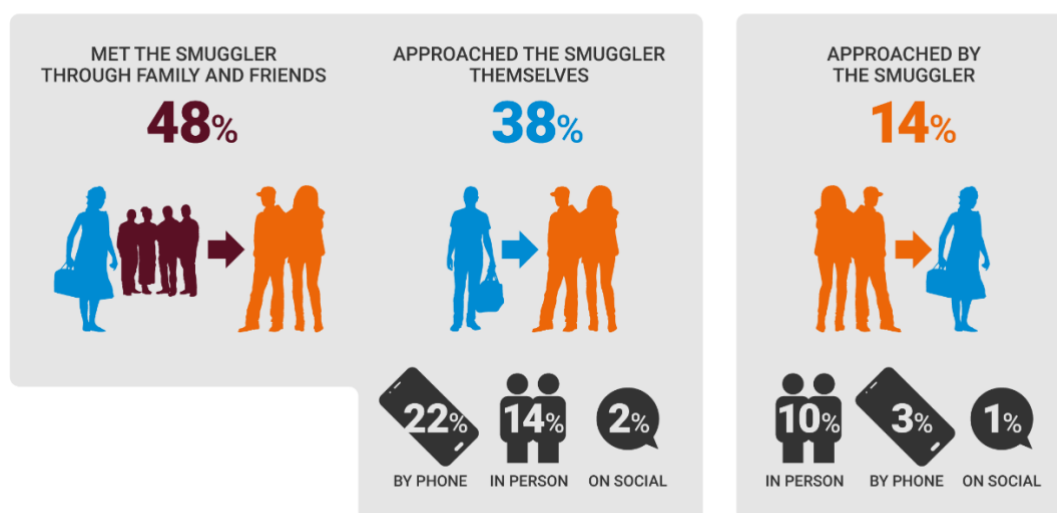
Smuggling organizers are exclusively Nigerian men, and often referred to as "*connection men*". Local agents in states of origin, transporters and other smuggling actors receive instructions from *connection men* over the phone, informing them about the next steps. A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo State in the South-South in 2021, for example, described his *connection man* as a man in his 40s from Delta State, based in Libya. This man has the connections to organise sea crossings, and perpetrates trafficking for sexual exploitation as well as smuggling of migrants:

"Why do they call him connection man? Because he draws the connection – he's the link. He has all the connections to the burger [local agent], the trolley [guide], the madam [female pimp], and other middlemen on the journey like the car and Hilux [pick-up], keke [rickshaw] and motorbike drivers."

The first step in the smuggling process is for potential clients to get in contact with local smuggling agents. Key to understanding the relationship is that smugglers rarely approach clients directly, but rather their services are sought out by intending migrants or people already on the move.

One in seven Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries in 2021 was approached directly by smugglers or facilitators in person, by phone, or on social media. However, there is a significant gender distinction. 22% of Nigerian women surveyed were approached by local smuggling or travel facilitation agents, as compared to just 7% of Nigerian men. Conversely, just 25% of Nigerian women surveyed approached the smuggler or facilitator themselves, as compared to 51% of Nigerian men.³³

FIRST CONTACT OF MIGRANTS WITH SMUGGLERS



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by MMC during 2021 with Nigerians on the move, in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

Intending Nigerian migrants identify a local smuggling agent through relatives or friends in Nigeria or abroad, or through word-of-mouth in their state of origin or residence in Nigeria.

Relatives or friends may simply provide them with a local number for the smuggler they used themselves or, for those based abroad, take an active part in the organization of the journey and take care of payments to the smuggler.

Nigerians from the South-South in particular are often in contact with smugglers from the beginning of their journeys, due to the established emigrant communities from these states in North African and European countries along the routes, as well as, in some cases, links with trafficking in persons of Nigerians along these same routes (see [Abuses](#) section).

The local agent, a low-level actor, makes the first contact with intending Nigerian migrants and is usually from the same state of origin. In Edo and Delta States in the South-South, the agents are referred to as “burgers.” Some are themselves former migrants. An interviewee in 2019 from an NGO in Lagos described how some returned migrants, due to lack of alternatives for income generation, get involved in migrant smuggling as local agents, because they are already familiar with the smuggling system and routes.³⁴

In some cases, parents of young people may play a role in encouraging their children to emigrate, due to lack of future prospects for these young people in their region of origin, and contact the smuggler on their behalf. As a key informant interviewed in Edo State in 2021 describes: *“You can see that a lot of parents are in support and they’re the ones encouraging their children to pass through the Libya route. Some parents even go the extra mile to look for the smugglers.”*

Local agents collect smuggling fees and provide a phone number for the next person to contact, who then provides the next contact, and so on. Agents receive a payment from the *connection man* for these initial contacts and may provide intending migrants with assistance in obtaining legitimate or fraudulent travel documentation.

Smuggling of Migrants and Related Offences

Smuggling of Migrants and Related Offences, according to the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol

Smuggling of Migrants: the procurement of the illegal entry of a person into a state, in order to obtain a financial or other material benefit (**art. 3**).

Smuggling-Related Offences: document fraud for the purposes of enabling smuggling of migrants, for a financial or other material benefit; and enabling a person to irregularly remain in a state, for a financial or other material benefit (**art. 6**).

Facilitation of irregular entry for profit: Transportation

The smuggling of migrants offence is constituted when a perpetrator facilitates another person’s irregular entry into a country for a financial or material benefit. Smugglers and facilitators pick up intending migrants at motor parks in Kano and other cities in the North-West zone, and are often paid by local agents in states of origin rather than directly by migrants.

According to interviewees from the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) in Kano in 2019, smugglers regularly change meeting points with clients and use different motor parks to evade law enforcement operations. While some travel facilitators assist Nigerians to undertake regular journeys, these same Nigerians may be smuggled further along the routes. Travel facilitators may therefore be mistakenly considered smugglers, and *vice versa*.

Within Nigeria, from Kano to the border with Niger Republic, travel is often by night and on less frequented or indirect routes, to avoid security checkpoints and smuggle Nigerians across informal border crossings into Niger. A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo State in the South South in 2021 described how, rather than take a direct bus from Benin City (Edo State) to Kano, the *burger* advised that they travel via Onitsha (Anambra State), to evade security checks. From there they took a bus to Zaria (Kaduna State) and another vehicle from there to Kano.

Smugglers and community networks both play an important role in the choice of route, with 34% of Nigerians surveyed in 2021 stating that the route was chosen by the smuggler or facilitator and 40% that friends or family had suggested it. Twenty-eight per cent stated that it was the cheapest route, 19% that it was the fastest, 20% that it was the safest and 24% that it was the route that they knew best.

When asked which border crossing had been facilitated for them by third parties, Nigerians surveyed in 2021 most commonly cited the border from Nigeria to Niger Republic (66%), within the ECOWAS Free Movement Zone. Provided that they had the proper travel documents and crossed at an official border crossing point, the entry was regular and smuggling of migrants is not constituted. If the crossing was irregular – i.e., they were not in possession of the proper travel documents and/or did not enter Niger at an official border crossing point, and the third party received a financial or material benefit, then smuggling of migrants was perpetrated.

Forty-five per cent of those surveyed had used a smuggler or facilitator to cross the border between Niger and Libya, where the likelihood is far higher that these were irregular border crossings. The remainder had used a smuggler or facilitator to cross other ECOWAS internal borders (36%), while just 10% had used a smuggler or facilitator to cross other international borders in North and Central Africa.

Smugglers transport migrants on commercial or “luxury” buses and vans (e.g. Peugeot J5) within Nigeria, and then private cars (e.g. VW Sharan) or motorbikes with multiple passengers to exit Nigeria, to avoid official border crossing points and security checks. Some migrants are transported across the border by traders, together with goods, such as fruit and vegetables.

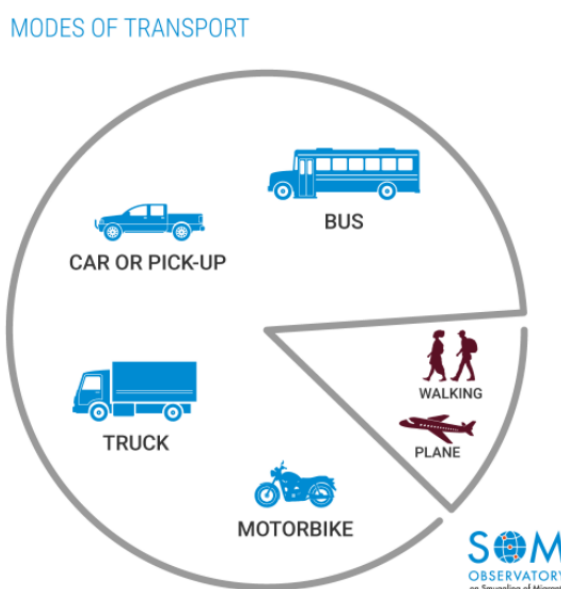
A key informant interviewed in Delta State in the South-South zone in 2021 described how intending migrants travel within Nigeria on crowded “*luxurious buses with attached people [carrying other people on their lap] and about 50 [people] standing*”. Upon arrival in Kano, they “*enter sports cars where about four persons will enter the boot, four will sit in the back seat, carrying another four persons on their laps and they will behave like as if they are sleeping so that their heads will not come out if they get to any security point.*” Other Nigerian migrants travel regularly by bus to Agadez, Niger, and only use smugglers after that point.

A Nigerian woman interviewed in Lagos in the South West in 2019 described her experience of crossing the Nigeria-Niger border on a motorbike: “I fell down three times from the motorcycle that was used to convey us [five people] from Katsina [Nigeria] to Zinder [Niger] due to apparent exhaustion [...]. I could remember that one of us was left behind eventually beside the road with severe bruises.”

Smuggling routes lead to Zinder, Niger, north of Kano, Nigeria, and from there to Agadez, Niger. Recent research suggests that Tahoua, Niger (north of Sokoto, Nigeria) is also gaining importance as a smuggling hub, though Agadez retains its status as the most important hub.³⁵ From Agadez, larger groups of Nigerians and other West and Central Africans board lorries and pick-ups to cross the border into Libya. Each pick-up or lorry carries between ten and fifty people.

At the border between Niger and Libya, local Southern Libyans transport Nigerians from Niger to Sebha, Libya, in Toyota pick-ups, while other smugglers, Libyan lorry drivers, transport both goods and people.³⁶ Within Libya, smuggling drivers are usually Libyans, although they may be accompanied by Nigerian smuggling guides. In some cases, on entering the desert north of Agadez, Niger, smugglers split groups into men and boys, and women and girls, before reuniting them again in Libya. It is not clear why this is happens.

Overall, the most common modes of transport used by Nigerians surveyed in 2021 were road vehicles: buses, cars and pick-ups, trucks, and motorbikes, reflecting the fact that Nigerians were travelling along land routes, with just 15% having walked and 3% having travelled by plane, suggesting little connection between air and land routes. Nigerians surveyed in Libya, however, were slightly more likely than those surveyed in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Tunisia, to have walked (17%) and travelled by plane (5%).



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by MMC during 2021 with Nigerians on the move, in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

Enabling irregular stay for the purpose of smuggling: Accommodation

While some smugglers travel together with Nigerian migrants on routes within countries, enabling their irregular stay, others provide contacts and instructions by phone. Smugglers also provide accommodation for Nigerians whose status is irregular in countries such as Niger, Mali, Libya and Tunisia. Despite ECOWAS free movement rights, Nigerians' status in Niger and Mali may be irregular because they do not have the proper travel documents and/or entered irregularly.

Journeys from Nigeria to countries in North Africa that involve smuggling may take months or even years, creating a significant demand for accommodation along the route. Nigerians spend time in migration hubs waiting for onward travel and/or earning money to pay for the next stage of the journey.

Collective accommodation - "safe houses" - run by smugglers accommodate between 10 and 100 people, close to border crossings or at important departure hubs, such as Kano and Katsina in the North-West zone of Nigeria and transit hubs, such as Agadez and Zinder, Niger. According to a key informant interviewed in Kano in 2021:

"Usually at this point, migrants disengage from the transporter or smuggler that brought them to Jibia [at the Nigeria-Niger border] from Kano. Another syndicate, who is a local dweller, who may be the owner of the safe house and who has knowledge of the community, takes over from Jibia border."

Document fraud for the purpose of smuggling

Smugglers also obtain passports and visas for Nigerian migrants. Many Nigerians travel within the ECOWAS sub-region with valid documents, but others may lose their passports, not be able to apply for a passport, or not be aware that passports or other travel documents are required. According to Interpol, fraudulent travel documents constitute a crucial pillar of the smuggling industry, with some smugglers renting out passports to clients to cross border crossing points in North Africa.³⁷ The price for buying fraudulent passports in Libya fluctuates widely and is influenced by the migrant's ability to speak Arabic, ethnic affiliations and perceived levels of wealth.

Fraudulent and fraudulently used passports are a key element of smugglers' *modus operandi* when it comes to smuggling by air. For example, a Nigerian man apprehended while attempting to enter the USA in 2017 had paid "hundreds of [US] dollars" for a fake invitation letter and identification card to attend a training program.³⁸ Perpetrators of smuggling of Nigerians by air to countries in the Middle East also provide fraudulent or fraudulently obtained entry visas. Some of these smugglers are also involved in trafficking in persons for forced labour, sexual exploitation and domestic servitude in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan.

Corruption

Research by the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants since its inception in 2019 has consistently shown that where there is smuggling, there is corruption. Bribes are requested by public officials both within countries (police and military at security checkpoints) and at land and air borders (by border guards and other airport officials), with the latter tending

to demand higher sums. The payment of these bribes on behalf of Nigerian migrants is often included as part of the package offered by smugglers. On the other hand, some Nigerians interviewed also mentioned bringing cash with them on the journey for the purpose of paying bribes. The amount of the bribe requested is subject to negotiation, and smugglers may be able to negotiate a form of group discount, constituting one of the key drivers for use of smugglers.

At some locations along smuggling routes from Nigeria to North Africa, sustained bribery systems have been maintained between public officials at checkpoints and borders, and smugglers, favoring the perpetration of smuggling along these routes. Forty-one percent of Nigerians surveyed in countries of transit and destination in 2021 said that bribes were requested once, occasionally or frequently on their journey, while 44% stated that public officials had neither been involved in, nor did they facilitate migrant smuggling, and 15% did not respond to this question.³⁹

A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo State in 2021 was travelling north to Kano State in the company of a smuggling guide, in order to be smuggled through Libya to Germany. The guide and the group of Nigerian intending migrants were intercepted and searched by law enforcement. The officers demanded a bribe of 22,000 *Naira* [US\$57] from the group, before allowing them to travel onwards.

Corruption also manifests itself in the impunity enjoyed by certain smugglers and smuggling groups. For example, one Nigerian man planning to migrate, interviewed in Kano, Nigeria in 2021, scoffed at the thought of Nigerians who have suffered abuse at the hands of their smugglers getting justice: *“I know it is difficult to get justice and I have heard a lot of stories of injustice related to this issue. This is because these smugglers are highly connected and the police you are reporting to may even be on their payroll, so how can you get justice?”*

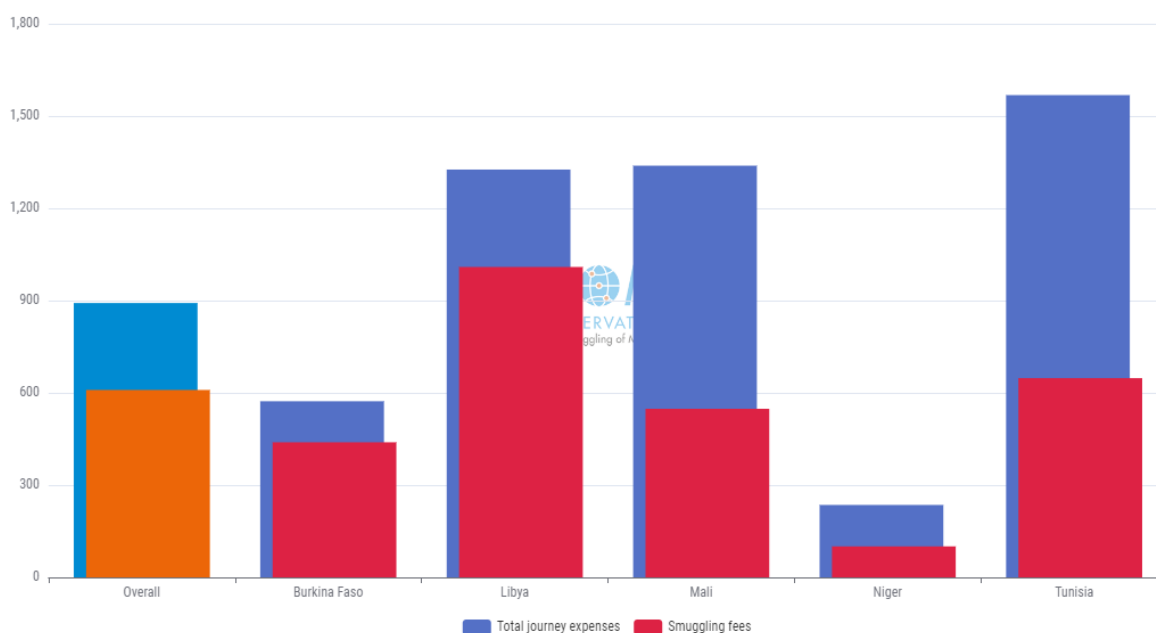
This can be contextualized in terms of the low level of arrests, investigations, prosecutions and convictions for migrant smuggling in Nigeria and in transit and destination countries. However, no further evidence is available on specific incidents of this type of corruption. See section on [Responses](#) for more details.

In addition, in the section on [Abuses](#), there is further analysis of abuses perpetrated by public officials, such as sexual abuse in exchange for passage through a checkpoint or across a border.

4. Fees, Proceeds and Payments

Fees

Smuggling fees as proportion of total journey expenditure, in US\$



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre during 2021 with Nigerians on the move in Burkina Faso (62), Libya (299), Mali (72), Niger (250) and Tunisia (63), in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

Nigerians surveyed in 2021 paid an average of US\$609 each for smugglers' or facilitators' services in order to get to the country where they took the survey (Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Libya or Tunisia). The average sum spent on the whole journey, including smuggling and travel facilitation services, bribes, transportation and pre-departure expenditure, was US\$892, so the smuggling fees represent a significant proportion.

Smuggling fees paid by Nigerians interviewed in 2019 and 2021 indicate price differences influenced by: the location of the migrants; their perceived wealth; services included in the package provided by the smuggler(s); and security issues along routes. A Nigerian man interviewed in Delta State in 2021 paid 350,000 Naira [US\$840] for his wife to be smuggled from Edo State to join him in Libya. Another Nigerian man interviewed in Edo in 2021 paid the smuggler 350,000 Naira [US\$840], with an agreement to pay an additional 120,000 Naira [US\$290] if he made it to Germany. A man interviewed in Lagos in the South-West zone in 2019 paid 300,000 Naira [US\$720] to a local smuggling agent who worked with a Nigerian smuggling organizer in Libya.

Local smuggling agents in states of origin in Nigeria usually charge a fee that covers the trip as far as Sabha or Tripoli in Libya. The lowest price mentioned by interviewees in Nigeria in 2019 was 150,000 Naira [US\$360] and the highest 600,000 Naira [US\$1,440]. These prices cover access to the network of smuggling contacts and transportation, and sometimes also bribes and accommodation, but usually exclude food and drink and other costs. A Nigerian man interviewed in Imo State in the South East in 2019 paid an additional 150,000 Naira [US\$360] for bribes, food and other basic needs.

Some smuggling services are charged separately, rather than as a full package, in the context of a “pay-as-you-go” smuggling system.⁴⁰ For example, a key informant interviewed in Kano in 2021 mentioned a price of around 10,000 Naira [US\$24] per person for irregularly crossing the Nigeria-Niger border by motorbike from Katsina State, though prices vary depending on the profile of the person crossing.

Proceeds

Among the criminal cases mentioned by law enforcement interviews in Nigeria in 2021 was a case involving a Nigerian man in Kano who had smuggled 30 Nigerian migrants. 350,000 Naira [US\$840] was confiscated from his account as proceeds from smuggling of migrants. A key informant interviewed in Edo State in 2021 mentioned a smuggler working at a local barber’s who received 100,000 Naira [US\$240] for each Nigerian man he referred to the smuggling network, run by a Nigerian man based in Libya.

The prices may also be significantly inflated by local agents. A key informant interviewed in Kano in 2021 mentioned a local agent charging intending migrants 400,000 Naira [US\$960] and passing on just 100,000 Naira to the smuggling organizer.

Some migrant smugglers are also involved in other licit and illicit activities. Particularly in Kano – a key smuggling departure hub – and in Benin City, Edo – an important point of origin, smugglers run hotels, shops, transport companies and other businesses, which may be used to launder smuggling proceeds. There is also some limited evidence of involvement of smugglers in other illicit activities, such as drug trafficking and trafficking for sexual exploitation (see [Abuses](#) section below).

As a key informant interviewed in Benin City in 2021 described:

“A lot of them have hotels [...], the big transport companies in Benin are run by them. They are the only ones that can buy buses for 10-15 million Naira [US\$24-36,000] and they can buy twenty of these buses to start the business. [...] We know them, and they usually show their level of flamboyance on arrival whenever they are in town. Some of them are selling Italian doors and even furniture and quite a number of things to make the money laundering easy.”

Methods of Payment

Among Nigerians surveyed in 2021 who had used a smuggler or facilitator, almost half (46%) paid in full before departure for the journey to the location where they were surveyed. As a possible indicator of labour exploitation and/or trafficking for forced labour, 17% had paid in kind with their labour. Twelve per cent were intending to pay in full at the destination and an

additional 9% upon service delivery. Ten per cent were paying in instalments along the way, and 5% responded that they had not paid the smuggler or facilitator.

There is also a significant distinction in methods of payment, depending on the gender of the smuggled person. This suggests the increased vulnerability of Nigerian women to exploitation and abuse by smugglers. While just 6% of Nigerian men surveyed had paid with their labour, 27% of Nigerian women had done so. Nigerian women surveyed were also less likely to have paid in full before departure (37% vs. 55% of Nigerian men) and twice as likely as men not to have paid the smuggler at all - reported by 22 Nigerian women (6%) and 11 Nigerian men (3%).

Intending migrants pay upfront through savings, sale of assets (including land and livestock) and loans, often involving other members of their families. Nigerians on the move surveyed in 2021 mostly financed their journeys through their own funds or savings (49%), their family paid (27%), by selling assets (23%) or by borrowing money (13%). It is important to note that 20% had not made any initial payment, potentially indicating a higher level of vulnerability to abuses perpetrated by the smugglers or others during the journey.

A man interviewed in Edo State in the South-South zone in 2019 had borrowed money from his family and friends, promising to pay it back when he arrived at his destination. A man interviewed in Imo State in the South-East in 2019 received help from his family members in financing the journey:

“my people invested a total of 400,000 Naira [US\$960] through my brother who made the connection with the agent in Owerri [Imo State].”

The family members of another man interviewed in Kano in 2019 organized the smuggling and were in contact with the smuggler on his behalf. A 2019 study conducted in southwest Nigeria corroborates these findings of how migration decisions often feature in families' planning processes to ensure their livelihoods.⁴¹

A gender distinction in terms of debts incurred may be indicative of smugglers also being involved in perpetrating trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation (see [Abuses](#) section below). Some Nigerians go into debt with the smuggler, agreeing to pay off the debt through their labour or a percentage of their earnings on arrival at the intended destination. It is more common for smuggled Nigerian women to reach an agreement with the smuggler to pay the fee on arrival. In Delta and Edo States in the South-South, women more commonly swear oaths and agree to repay the smuggling fee in Europe than men.

Thirty-two per cent of Nigerians surveyed in 2021 had run out of money to fund their journey. The shortfall for these people was mostly covered by working *en route* (71%) or asking family and friends to send them more money (23%). Others came to an agreement with the smuggler or facilitator to pay later (11%), placing them in a vulnerable situation, or borrowed money from fellow migrants (6%). Still others reported sex or sexual abuse as payment (7%), in-kind labour (11%), and begging (4%).

Gender-specific aspects are clearly in evidence here. While 77% of Nigerian men who had run out of money worked, 62% of Nigerian women did so. 16% of Nigerian women who had run out of money provided sexual services or were sexually abused as payment, while no

Nigerian men reported this. Just 6% of the Nigerian men in this group agreed with the smuggler or facilitator that they would pay later, compared to 18% of Nigerian women.

Smuggled Nigerians may spend time working in towns and cities in Niger and Libya in order to pay smuggling fees for their onward journey. Their status is often irregular and so they work in the large informal economies of the two countries, either finding work independently or through the smuggler brokering employment with third parties. The earnings are used to pay the smuggler, or the migrants work directly for the smuggler, paying the fee in kind with their labour.

According to a key informant interviewed in Owerri, Imo State, in 2019:

“in many transit points, we have received reports of male migrants doing some menial jobs, like cleaning, and in some other cases forced to work on farms in order to raise some money to survive or to progress with their trips.”

5. Abuses of Smuggled People

Smuggling of Migrants Protocol and the Protection of the Rights of Smuggled Migrants

The **purpose** of the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol is “to prevent and combat the smuggling of migrants, as well as to promote cooperation among States Parties to that end, while protecting the rights of smuggled migrants” (Art. 2). In addition to the prevention, investigation and prosecution of smuggling offences, the Protocol covers the **protection of the rights of people who have been the object of smuggling offences** (Art. 4).

Article 6.3 of the Protocol sets out **aggravated smuggling offences** as those committed in circumstances:

- (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.

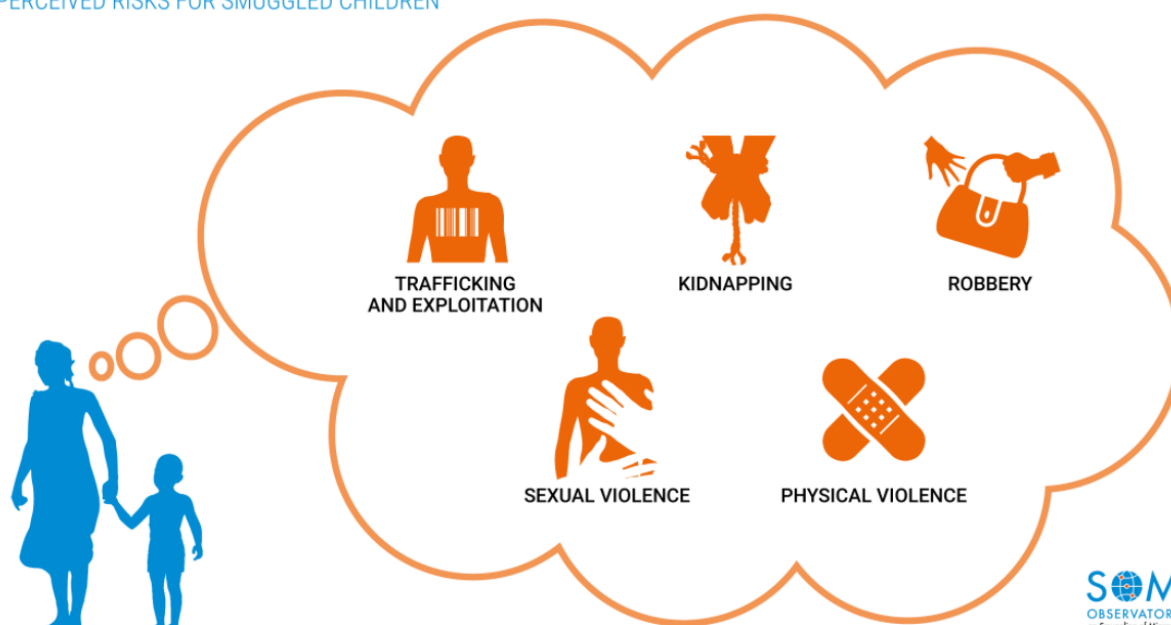
Both smugglers and other actors perpetrate abuses and crimes against smuggled Nigerians.⁴² When Nigerians surveyed in 2021 were asked about personally experiencing abuses during the journey, almost half cited physical violence, one in four detention, and one in five sexual violence, and deprivation of liberty for the purposes of extortion.⁴³

PERPETRATORS OF ABUSES



While no children were interviewed for this research for ethical reasons (see [Methodology](#)), Nigerian adults surveyed in 2021 were asked about what they perceived as the risks for smuggled children on these routes (see infographic below).⁴⁴ Almost half (48%) cited trafficking and exploitation, 30% kidnapping, 28% physical violence, 27% sexual violence, and 4% robbery. The overwhelming majority (88%) considered children to be highly or very highly exposed to these dangers in the context of the journey.

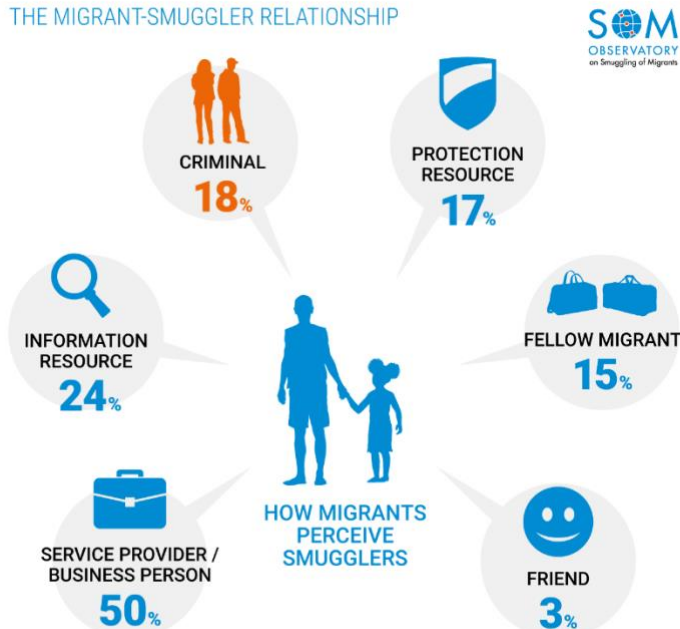
PERCEIVED RISKS FOR SMUGGLED CHILDREN



Aggravated Smuggling Offences

“An irregular migrant is just like dropping into the ocean and living at the mercy of whoever smuggled them abroad” - key informant interviewed in Delta State in 2021. ⁴⁵

THE MIGRANT-SMUGGLER RELATIONSHIP



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by MMC during 2021 with Nigerians on the move, in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See [Methodology](#) for more details.

The evidence on abuses perpetrated by smugglers against Nigerians, some of which may constitute aggravated smuggling offences, is mixed. Comparatively few of the Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries in 2021 who had used a smuggler or facilitator considered that actor to be a criminal (18%). In fact, most saw them as a service provider or businessperson (50%), an information resource (24%) or a protection resource (17%), while 15% saw them as a fellow migrant and 3% as a friend.

On the other hand, there are also indications of abuses perpetrated by smugglers, ranging from deception and preventing access to means of communication, to violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons. Power dynamics between the relatively more powerful smuggler and less powerful smuggled migrant impact vulnerability to abuses.

In some cases, smugglers receive payment, but do not provide the service as agreed, or do not provide the service at all. According to a law enforcement officer interviewed in Lagos in 2019: *“The most popular mechanism for operating along relevant routes by the smugglers is simply through deceitful packages.”* This may take the form of deception in terms of the destination and/or the modes of transport, or the smuggler simply abandons their client along the route, before reaching the final agreed-upon destination.

Seven out of ten Nigerians surveyed strongly agree or agree that the smuggler or facilitator helped them to achieve their migration goal, with just 13% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with this statement. Conversely, 22% of Nigerians surveyed strongly agree or agree that they were intentionally misled about the journey by the smuggler or facilitator, while 57% strongly disagreed or disagreed that they were misled.

It is common practice for smugglers to confiscate cellphones from clients when they leave Nigeria, according to a number of Nigerian migrants interviewed, so that they cannot communicate with relatives, friends, or potential competing smugglers while *en route*. Smuggled Nigerians deprived of their liberty for extortion by smugglers were allowed to call relatives and friends only in order to instruct them to pay a ransom.

Families and local communities may go into debt in order to secure the release of Nigerians detained by smugglers for the purposes of extortion. Across Niger and Libya, smugglers claim not to have been paid and deliver people to detention camps or situations of forced labour. A Nigerian man interviewed in Delta State in 2021 described smugglers providing transportation in Niger and Libya: *“if I see a driver, I know the one that can take you to your next destination and the one that can take you to a kidnapping camp or a slave camp.”*

Another man interviewed in Delta in 2021 had to “buy his freedom” when he was sold to a fellow Nigerian man in Libya by the smuggler who brought him from Agadez, Niger. The smuggler claimed that he had not been paid by the man’s *burger* (local agent). The interviewee’s mother transferred 170,000 Naira [US\$409] to the “buyer’s” account in Nigeria to secure her son’s release.

Smugglers place Nigerians in situations that may endanger their lives or safety, particularly in the context of the journey from Agadez, Niger, to Sabha and other destinations in Libya. Conditions in the desert and at sea present serious risks to the lives and safety of smuggled Nigerians, as well as risks from violent smugglers who kill *“any of the victims who misbehave”*, according to a key informant interviewed in Delta in 2021.

Smuggled Nigerians are subject to food and water deprivation; some interviewees had witnessed co-travelers dying because of lack of water and food. A Nigerian man described how he and his group had been forced to eat dead animals who had died along the routes in order to survive in the desert. One returned Nigerian receiving support at a centre in Edo State in 2021 told a key informant *“how they slept and before the next morning almost half of them were buried alive in sand dunes in the desert.”* Another key informant interviewed in Edo in 2021 spoke of providing services to returned *“unaccompanied migrant [children], whose mothers and fathers had died in the Mediterranean Sea.”*

Pregnant women and girls, and women and girls caring for travelling companions, are at heightened risk of food and water deprivation.⁴⁶ Nigerian women and girls in general are also vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation by smugglers during the journey. Some are expected to pay for their journey *“in cash or in kind”*, meaning being subjected to sexual abuse as a form of smuggling payment.

In many cases, migrant smuggling and human trafficking routes overlap, and the situation of vulnerability of smuggled Nigerians is abused in order to traffic them for sexual or labor exploitation. Trafficking and other human rights violations are perpetrated against Nigerians by smugglers, constituting aggravated smuggling offences.

A potential case of trafficking for sexual exploitation by a smuggler involved two Nigerian women from Jos, Plateau State (North-Central zone). One of the women was interviewed in Kano in 2021. They were promised work in a restaurant in Tunisia and a female Nigerian smuggler organized their bus journey from Jos to Kano. In Kano, the women contacted the smuggler, who sent a man to transfer them to another smuggler who drove them to a village in the neighbouring Nigerian state of Katsina. On arrival there, they were collected by a man on a motorbike and taken to accommodation where around fifty other Nigerian women and men were all waiting to cross into Niger Republic.

Here they met some young men from Edo State who were travelling to Italy, having taken the route before. They laughed when one of the women told them that she and her sister would be getting a flight from Niger to Tunisia and would work in a restaurant, and told her that they would be trafficked to Europe for sexual exploitation in prostitution:

“After talking to those boys [sic], I told my sister that we had been deceived and that we should look for a way to escape. The boys said that it is no longer possible to escape because everyone in the village is either a smuggler or a trafficker and that even if we escape, we will still be caught by the agent.”

Abuses perpetrated by other Actors

The research on smuggling of Nigerians evinces widespread kidnapping, illegal detention, extortion, torture, physical and sexual violence and exploitation, perpetrated against Nigerians in a smuggling context by various actors other than smugglers. The irregular status of smuggled Nigerians in countries of transit and destination, as well as issues with rule of law in many localities along the routes, especially in Niger and Libya, exacerbates their vulnerability to abuses.

Kidnapping, illegal detention and extortion are perpetrated by various actors in Libya and Niger. In the detention context, Nigerians are subjected to regular physical violence, sexual abuse (of girls, boys, women and men) and torture (e.g., coerced into maintaining stressful positions over longer durations of time). They also witness these abuses, including men forced to witness the sexual abuse of family members.⁴⁷ One Nigerian man was forced to sit still for one day, lie down for another day, and then to stand up for the next day, resulting in physical injury.

Smuggled Nigerian girls, boys, women and men are subjected to deprivation of liberty and physical violence in order to coerce them into calling family members in Nigeria to request money for them to be released. Particularly in Libya, smuggled Nigerians are at risk of unlawful killing and kidnapping for ransom by Libyan actors. They are threatened with death if they or their families back home are not able to pay the ransom demanded.

A key informant spoke of Nigerians in Libya being hijacked on the roads, kidnapped, sold and subjected to forced labour. As of 2019, there were eight ongoing criminal investigations in Benin City, Edo State, into extortion of relatives of people in the state, who were illegally detained abroad. In the few cases where extortion schemes are unsuccessful, Nigerians are forced to pay off their “debt” by working either within the detention facility or in the surrounding community.⁴⁸

Public officials and non-state actors subject smuggled Nigerians to physical and sexual violence during the smuggling journey. Smuggled Nigerian women and girls, as well as some boys and men, are subject to sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, by security personnel or members of armed groups, while men are forced to witness these abuses, both inside and outside of the detention context. In some cases, other members of the group that women and girls are travelling with put pressure on them to acquiesce, in order to allow the whole group to continue the journey, and to prevent perpetrators from harming the rest of the group.

Many Nigerians interviewed, who were repatriated as trafficking victims from Libya, had started out their journey in a smuggling context. They were then kidnapped and/or detained by different actors in Libya, and exploited. Nigerian men and boys are taken from detention facilities, in Libya especially, and trafficked for labor exploitation on construction sites nearby.

A Nigerian man from Abia State in the South-East zone, interviewed in Delta in 2021, worked at a carwash in Libya to earn enough money to pay the fees for the smuggling journey by sea to Italy. However, he was not paid. He managed to exit the situation, but was apprehended by other Libyans who forced him to work on a farm for three months without pay. Another Nigerian man then “bought” the man’s freedom and took him to Tripoli, where he worked in order to pay to be smuggled from Sabratha, Libya, to Italy, though he was detained by the Libyan police in Sabratha before he managed to travel.

A Nigerian man interviewed in Delta in 2021 was forced to dig trenches after being apprehended by people he referred to as “bushmen” near Agadez, Niger. Nigerians who are detained or kidnapped along the routes, and especially in the Libyan smuggling hubs of Sabha, Sabratha and Tripoli, describe their experiences of labour and sexual exploitation. One Nigerian woman interviewed in Lagos in 2019 was in a situation of sexual exploitation and was subsequently, in her own words, “freed” by a man who “bought” her and then exploited her in domestic servitude.

Two Nigerian men interviewed in Edo in 2021 worked in Libya in tomato harvesting, farming and construction, including for “camp” bosses in Libya, while awaiting the sea crossing to Europe. The Nigerian women they travelled with were sexually abused as a form of “payment” and sexually exploited in prostitution. A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo in 2019 described how his *trolley* (smuggling guide) was also transporting a woman from Edo to Italy, and was to be paid with a free Mediterranean crossing if he successfully transferred this woman to a *madam* (female sex trafficker).



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6. Counter Smuggling Responses

Sections 64-101 of the Nigerian [Immigration Act \(Act No. 8 of 2015\)](#) domesticate the relevant provisions of the [UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#). The Act criminalizes smuggling of migrants (Part X) and offences in connection with smuggling of migrants (Part XI); establishes a directorate in charge of prohibiting the smuggling of migrants; provides for restitution for smuggled persons (Part XII); and covers migrants' civil remedies (Part XIV). The Act criminalizes anyone who, *"for financial or any other material benefit, by means of a fraudulent travel or identity document, procure[s] the illegal entry of a person into, or the illegal stay of a person in, a country of which that person is not a national or permanent resident"* (Section 64). Section 65 of the Nigerian Immigration Act defines aggravated smuggling offences, in line with the definition in Article 6.3 of the UN Migrant Smuggling Protocol.

As an ECOWAS Member State, Nigeria is covered by the [ECOWAS Protocols on Free Movement](#) (see [Routes](#) section). If the object of a migrant smuggling offence is an ECOWAS citizen smuggled within the ECOWAS sub-region, the Nigerian Immigration Act 2015 provides for mitigated penalties. Nigeria has also adopted multiple policies, action plans, strategies and guidelines on migrant smuggling, including the National Migration Policy (2015).⁴⁹

The [Nigeria Immigration Service \(NIS\)](#) is responsible for controlling Nigeria's borders, at the six international airports (Abuja, Enugu, Kaduna, Kano, Lagos, and Port Harcourt), six

seaports (in Lagos, Cross River, Rivers and Delta States) ⁵⁰ and 114 official land border crossings (at least 84 of which are operational). Nigeria has land borders with two ECOWAS Member States: Niger and Benin, and two Member States of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS): Cameroon and Chad. Sixteen Nigerian states have international land borders: Adamawa, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Jigawa, Katsina, Kebbi, Kwara, Lagos, Niger, Ogun, Oyo, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe, and Zamfara. The land borders in Sokoto, Yobe, and Katsina, all bordering Niger Republic, experience the highest regular traffic.⁵¹

In order to prevent and combat smuggling of migrants, the NIS cooperates at the national level with the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Armed Forces, the State Security Service (DSS), Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), and the Nigeria Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). The National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) chairs a multi-agency technical working group on operational activities related to migration.

NIS intercepted 22 suspected migrant smugglers in 2018, 72 in 2019 and 11 in 2020. In 2020, numbers decreased across migration management indicators due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions. NIS arrested all 11 suspected smugglers in 2020 in Edo State. 26.4% of immigration-related cases prosecuted by NIS in 2020 involved Nigerians as offenders, and most of the offences were in relation to passports. Offences perpetrated by foreign citizens and companies involved residence status violations, irregular migration and employment of foreign citizens violations.⁵²

Some national counter-smuggling efforts take the approach of preventing Nigerians from leaving the country, rather than pursuing criminal smuggling actors. NIS records 106 "irregular migrants" intercepted in 2019 and 71 in 2020, though it is not clear whether the people referred to are Nigerians or foreign citizens. During 2020, these 71 migrants were intercepted in Sokoto State (36), Ogun State (32) and Edo State (3). 25,976 Nigerians were refused departure in 2019 and 3,112 in 2020.⁵³

The field research provided evidence of Nigerian law enforcement officers identifying and intercepting Nigerian citizens planning to leave the country, if they perceive that that it is likely that they will embark on an irregular migration journey. Three of the Nigerian women and men interviewed in 2021 had been intercepted *en route* within Nigeria and instructed to return to their point of origin. In other cases, Nigerian citizens' passport applications were denied in order to prevent them from leaving the country, on the assumption that they were to be smuggled.

The denial of passport applications presents a specific risk of irregular travel and smuggling of migrants. As set out above in the Routes section, Nigerians as ECOWAS citizens can travel regularly and do not need smugglers within the free movement area, as long as they cross at an official internal ECOWAS border crossing point with a passport or other valid travel document. The Nigeria Immigration Service issued around 2.7 million Nigerian passports during the period 2019 to 2021.⁵⁴

In order to increase its capacity to prosecute immigration-related offences, including smuggling of migrants, NIS recruited additional staff for the legal unit, most of whom are

posted outside headquarters, in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. NIS also posted additional personnel to border regions, upgraded facilities at borders, built migrant detention facilities, and put in place the [Migrant Information and Data Analysis System \(MIDAS\)](#), in partnership with IOM.⁵⁵ NIS also engages in outreach activities with local community groups, and carries out pro-active investigations to identify smugglers through intelligence gathering and undercover operations.⁵⁶

A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo State in 2021 indicated the presence of law enforcement activity to combat migrant smuggling, when he described how his smuggler told him to remain in Delta State for three weeks before he could travel further north, because the smuggling *connection man* had encountered difficulties with his previous group of migrants, who had been intercepted. He was under investigation and had to lie low before organizing the next smuggling journey.

At state level in Kano, for example, NIS conducts "irregular migration motor park patrols," as well as inspections of hotels. They sometimes receive tip-offs from informants at motor parks and hotel managers about "suspicious travel," leading to the interception of intending Nigerian migrants, as well as suspected smugglers. Informants at motor parks and at Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport work with the NIS to observe people who regularly travel between Kano and Agadez, Niger. The Kano Road and Traffic Agency also sets up roadblocks at night on major roads and checkpoints to detect and intercept possible smuggling and trafficking cases

7. Methodology

As in all [UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#) research, this StoryMap is based on the Observatory Research [Methodology](#). Both primary and secondary sources were analyzed for the purposes of this research.

Primary Sources: Field Research

Three separate phases of field research on migrant smuggling of Nigerians were carried out for this analysis. For **Phase 1**, in November 2019, 76 qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants (law enforcement, civil society organizations, immigration officers and community policing units) and returned Nigerian migrants, in the Nigerian states of Edo, Imo, Lagos, and Kano. Fourteen Nigerian women and 23 Nigerian men who were returned migrants were interviewed, and 14 women and 25 men who were key informants.

The research was carried out in the framework of the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, in partnership with the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the Network of Civil Society Organizations Against Trafficking, Abuse and Labor (NACTAL) and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI).

Phase 2 of the field research comprised interviews with 84 key informants (32 women and 52 men) and 38 Nigerians who were returned or intending migrants (22 women and 16 men), conducted in the eight Nigerian states of Adamawa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Enugu, FCT (Abuja), Kano and Osun during the period April to July 2021, in the framework of the UNODC Nigeria Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment.

Phase 3 of the field research consisted of quantitative surveys among Nigerians on the move in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya and Tunisia, during the period April to December 2021, carried out in partnership with the [Mixed Migration Centre](#) in the framework of the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants. A total of 746 Nigerians were surveyed in the context of this field research.

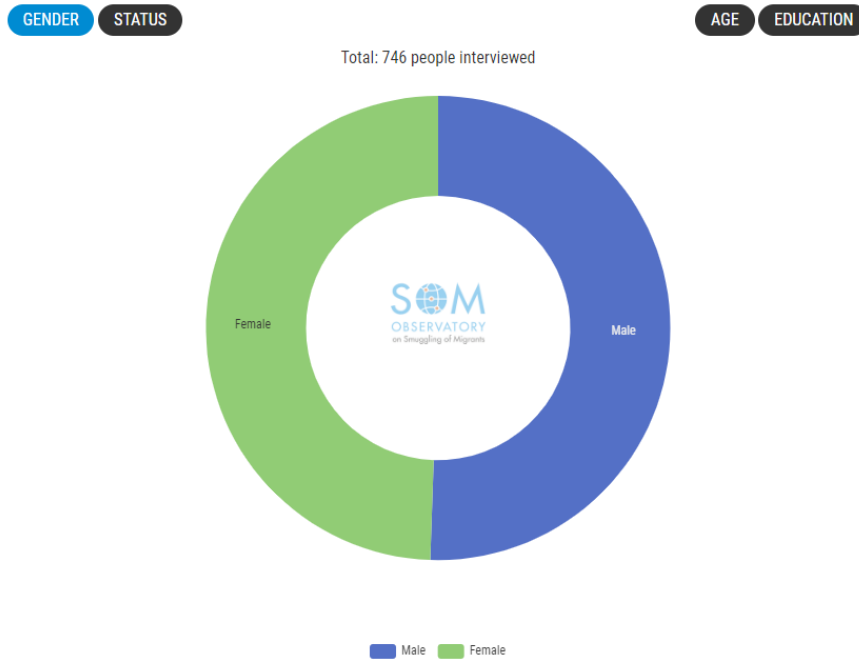
The majority of Nigerians surveyed in Phase 3 were young adults, with the average age of 29 years old. 51% were men and 49% were women, which reflects additional efforts in the sampling strategy to survey women and understand their experiences better, rather than reflecting the gender composition of Nigerians on the move in general. The majority of those surveyed – 70% - considered that they were still *en route* and had not yet reached the end of their journeys. The majority – 58% - did not have children, while 42% did have children, mostly one or two. However, only 17% of all those surveyed were travelling with their children.

The majority had been living in urban areas (76%) prior to emigrating. The socioeconomic profile shows that most of those surveyed had at least a secondary education (71%), with only 7% not having completed any schooling, but just 6% with a university degree. Most had had a source of income during the past year (69%), through casual or occasional work (41%), self-employed (33%) or a regular paid job (25%) in the sectors of retail/catering services (47%), construction (14%), domestic work (9%), transportation (6%) or industry (3%).

Secondary Sources: Desk-Based Research

Desk-based research carried out for this StoryMap drew on publicly available material, including reports by international organizations and NGOs, academic articles and studies and other relevant published work. The desk research also included analysis of data sources provided by the Nigeria Immigration Service, the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, IOM, UNHCR, Frontex, and Eurostat. Where relevant, data was analyzed and used to triangulate and substantiate main points of the research. This research also incorporates valuable feedback and input received from key Nigerian government stakeholders at a workshop on the Nigeria Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment held by UNODC in May 2022 in Abuja, Nigeria.

Overview of Return and Intending Migrants Interviewed in Nigeria in 2021



End Notes

1. UNFPA estimates, 2022: www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/NG.
2. World Bank (2022). A Better Future for All Nigerians: Nigeria Poverty Assessment 2022. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/37295>.
3. IDMC (2022). Global Report on Internal Displacement 2022. www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2022/, as of 31 December 2021.
4. This contrasts with the countries of residence of the 1.4 million Nigerian migrants officially registered abroad, for whom the United States, the United Kingdom, Cameroon and Niger are the most important destination countries. See: Adhikari, Samik, Sarang Chaudhary, and Nkechi Linda Ekeator (2021). Of Roads Less Travelled: Assessing the Potential of Economic Migration to Provide Overseas Jobs for Nigeria's Youth. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35995/Of-Roads-Less-Traveled-Assessing-the-Potential-of-Economic-Migration-to-Provide-Overseas-Jobs-for-Nigeria-s-Youth.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
5. The 15 ECOWAS Member States, which implement the Free Movement Protocols, are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
6. Hamadou, A. (2020). Free Movement of Persons in West Africa Under the Strain of COVID-19. AJIL Unbound, 114, 337-341. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/68CCC39D41DBA80EA6E15F1AE0DE86AA/S2398772320000665a.pdf/div-class-title-free-movement-of-persons-in-west-africa-under-the-strain-of-covid-19-div.pdf>
7. Hamadou, A. (2020). Free Movement of Persons in West Africa Under the Strain of COVID-19. AJIL Unbound, 114, 337-341. www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/68CCC39D41DBA80EA6E15F1AE0DE86AA/S2398772320000665a.pdf/div-class-title-free-movement-of-persons-in-west-africa-under-the-strain-of-covid-19-div.pdf. However, according to IOM data, as of January 2022, there has been a significant shift in the West and Central Africa region, with the removal of many travel restrictions and their replacement with specific conditions for authorized entry. See: <https://displacement.iom.int/sites/default/files/public/reports/DTM-COVID19%20Global%20Overview%20Output%202021-02-2022.pdf>.
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13. Akintola, O. O., & Akintola, O. (2015). "West Africans in the informal economy of South Africa: The case of low skilled Nigerian migrants." The Review of Black Political Economy, 42(4), 379- 398; Akanle, O. (2011). "Kinship socio-economics of Nigerian international migrants". Diaspora Studies 4(2): 105-124.
14. <https://migration.iom.int/europe/arrivals>. See also: MMC (2022). What's new? Analysing the latest trends on the Central Mediterranean mixed migration route to Italy: <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/whats-new-analysing-the-latest-trends-on-the-central-mediterranean-mixed-migration-route-to-italy/>
15. UNODC calculations based on Frontex Monthly Detections of IBC Data, downloaded from: <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>.
16. During 2021, 43 Nigerians arrived by land and 17 by sea on the Eastern Mediterranean route; 850 by sea on the Central Mediterranean; 36 at the Eastern Borders (entering from Belarus); and 2 by land from Morocco to Spain. UNODC calculations based on Frontex Monthly Detections of IBC Data, downloaded from: <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>.
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- 40: <https://displacement.iom.int/datasets/libya-migrants-baseline-assessment-round-40>.
18. Frontex (2020). Annual Risk Analysis; European Migrant Smuggling Centre (2020) 4th Annual Activity Report.
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20. See: Atong, Kennedy, Emmanuel Mayah, and Akhator Odigie (2018). Africa Labour Migration to GCC States: The Case of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda: An African Trade Union View. ITUC.
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23. www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/.
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25. See: Mixed Migration Centre (MMC, 2021). Smuggling and mixed migration: Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection. 4Mi Snapshot produced in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants: <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/smuggling-and-mixed-migration/>.
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54. Press Statement by the Nigerian Minister of the Interior, 11 November 2021.
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56. See also: Optimity Advisors, ICMPD and ECRE (2015). A study on smuggling of migrants: Characteristics, responses and cooperation with third countries. Final Report. For the European Migration Network (EMN). Brussels: European Commission.

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