



UNODC

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



Smuggling of Migrants

A Global Review and Annotated Bibliography
of Recent Publications

Executive Summary

Executive summary

Smuggling of Migrants: A Global Review and Annotated Bibliography of Recent Publications

The purpose of this thematic review is to survey existing sources and research papers on migrant smuggling, to provide a summary of knowledge and identify gaps based on the most recent and relevant research available on migrant smuggling from a worldwide perspective. While structuring the literature review in thematic chapters, each section of the report is also divided into regional sub-chapters, in order to better illustrate knowledge, gaps and specific issues as appropriate. The research is based on the literature available in English and French, and includes well informed journalistic books, reports and academic articles. It does not aim or claim to be comprehensive.

Chapter 2 focuses on the different ways to define and conceptualize migrants smuggling (e.g. as a migration business, a security threat, or a family (network) business). It highlights prevailing confusion between migrant smuggling and other forms of organized crimes, such as trafficking in persons. The review shows that each of the theories used to conceptualize migrant smuggling have brought to light different aspects of migrant smuggling however, used separately, they do not manage to capture the many dimensions of the migrant smuggling phenomenon. Most of the existing literature suffers from a ‘Western centric’ approach; there is also an objective lack of literature produced from source countries’ prospective.

Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the methodologies currently applied for researching migrant smuggling as available within the accessible literature. Currently, quantitative research methodologies suffer from a lack of reliable data and efforts to harmonise data gathering should be pursued as further discussed under chapter 4. The reviewed literature shows a positive evolution of the qualitative research. Despite great practical difficulties and obstacles, empirical research has significantly developed over the past years and has gained insight into the smuggling process and the actors involved. Knowledge gaps highlighted throughout the review also show that the geographical coverage should be more balanced, as there is a critical lack of information available about Central, East and Southern Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean countries.

Chapter 4 discusses the lack of adequate research methodology and tools available to accurately measure the phenomenon of migrant smuggling. The lack of harmonised methodologies makes it very difficult to compare statistical data and portray a realistic assessment of the scope of that phenomenon. According to the accessible literature, so far, the bulk of the research has been dedicated to the estimation of that phenomenon in Western Europe and in Northern America, whilst very little is known about the volume of migrant smuggling elsewhere. The literature reviewed also reveals a dual perspective about the geographical trends and smuggling routes. Recent research shows that smuggling routes are far more diverse than initially conceived and that Western-centric visions may not accurately represent the complex dynamics of migrant smuggling. It also shows the adaptability of the smuggling organizations may shift routes according to law enforcement strategies.

Chapter 5 considers information available about the social and educational background of the smuggled migrants and their role during the smuggling process. The literature reviewed shows a

great disparity of volume and quality of information available about the profile and characteristics of migrants. Further, research has been primarily produced by researchers from destination countries, while there seems to be little literature produced by transit and source countries. This outsider's perspective might have an impact on the understanding of the characteristics and profiles of the migrants. According to the sources reviewed, there is a lack of specific research devoted to vulnerable migrants - women, unaccompanied minors, and refugees - eventhough they seem to be an ever growing proportion of the total number of migrants smuggled worldwide.

The research reviewed under chapter 6 shows a critical lack of information about smugglers' profiles. As a consequence, part of the literature reviewed relies on stereotypes rather than on a substantial analysis. Scholars' views can be divided into two perspectives: the criminological and the sociological perspective. While the research that is currently available seems to draw a strict line between the categories of actors involved, future research should take into consideration the fact that migrants may become smugglers themselves in the course of their journey towards the destination country. Sources reviewed generally lack gender and age perspectives. Further research on the potential involvement of women and minors in smuggling activities would be very helpful to get a more accurate picture of persons currently involved in smuggling activities.

Chapter 7 considers typologies of organizational structures and actors involved in migrant smuggling activities. Despite the great disparity in the quantity and the quality of the information available about the organization of smuggling networks, there is a certain consensus about the fact that smuggling networks function according to the 'enterprise model' with large numbers of smaller, flexible crime groups or individual criminals that interact when necessary. Whilst the link with mafia and organized criminal organizations remains controversial, the research available highlights that increasingly sophisticated networks have replaced small-scale businesses in regions where anti-smuggling law enforcement strategies are particularly robust.

The literature reviewed under chapter 8 only conveys a partial assessment of the *modus operandi* used by smuggling networks around the world. Although North America and Europe – and to some extent North and West Africa - are relatively well-covered, there is comparatively very little information available in the accessible literature about Latin America, East and Central Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa. Information compiled in this chapter shows the complexity and sophistication of smugglers' *modus operandi*; in particular, document forgery and parallel banking systems allow migrants to have access to fairly expensive services. Although still scattered, the research available highlights the role of corrupt government officials in the smuggling process both in origin, transit and destination countries.

Chapter 9 looks at the human and social costs of migrant smuggling. According to the sources available, there is a lack of substantial research on the human cost of migrant smuggling and the level of information varies greatly from one region to another. Age and gender sensitive research should be further developed as testimonies have revealed the extreme vulnerability of women and minors during the smuggling process. Information about the social cost of migrant smuggling is still scattered. Future research should be developed in order to create a better understanding of the issue; this would help specialized agencies and decision makers craft effective awareness raising programmes and, in the longterm, to stem migrant smuggling in full compliance with international standards.



UNODC

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

For more information about UNODC's work against migrant smuggling contact:

Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Unit

UNODC P.O. Box 500, 1400 Vienna, Austria

Tel. (+43-1) 26060-5687

Email: ahtmsu@unodc.org

Online: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/smuggling-of-migrants.html