

FOCUS ON MIGRANT SMUGGLING FROM NIGERIA

Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling of Nigerians

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants

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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. However, due to limited options for regular migratory journeys, a minority of Nigerian migrants use migrant smugglers to facilitate their migratory movement. 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 and through Nigeria.

Context

Nigeria is Africa’s most populous country, with more than 200 million inhabitants.¹ The country comprises 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). 39% of Nigerians live below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per person per day, and a further 32% are vulnerable to falling into extreme poverty.² 2.7 million people are internally displaced within the country.³

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

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Time Period	11.2019	04-07.2021	04-12.2021
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
Methodology	Qualitative in-depth interviews	Qualitative in-depth interviews	Surveys
Nigerian Migrants	37	38	746
Key Informants	39	84	-
Total	76	122	746

The data and information relates primarily to migrant smuggling of Nigerians to and through West and North Africa, and onward to Southern Europe. The information obtained on smuggling of Nigerians on other routes, and on smuggling of people of other nationalities to and through Nigeria, is also analyzed here. It is, however, necessarily covered in less detail than smuggling of Nigerians through West and North Africa.

1. Migrant smuggling routes

The main routes for migrant smuggling of Nigerians by land and sea lead from the country 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. While also referring to other routes, the research carried out for this analysis focuses primarily on smuggling of Nigerians to and through West and North Africa.

The most common intended final destinations among Nigerians on the move, surveyed in 2021 along land routes in West and North Africa for Phase 3 of this research, were Italy, Germany, Libya, Niger, Algeria, the UK, Mali, and the USA. 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.⁴

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, among other issues, as of mid-2020, 66% of the 352 border crossing points within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sub-region were closed, and a further 26% were only open to transportation of goods and/or returning nationals.⁵ Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries during 2021 were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their migration trajectories. 24% answered that they had not experienced a direct impact of the pandemic. Among those who did experience impacts of the pandemic on their migration trajectories, 69% responded that the migration journey had become more difficult because of border restrictions. 38% considered that the pandemic had increased the existing risks of migration, while 16% had gotten stuck at the location where they completed the survey due to the pandemic, and 14% no longer had the resources to finance their journey.

By Land to West and North Africa

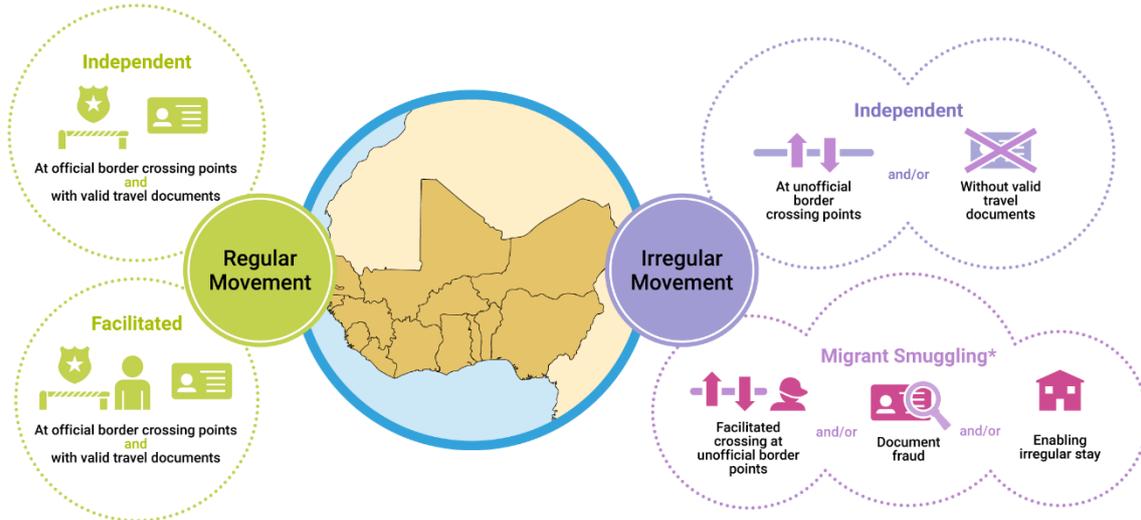
As ECOWAS citizens,⁶ Nigerians have the right to enter and reside in another ECOWAS Member State without requiring a visa, provided that they present themselves at an official border crossing point with the required travel documents. In some cases, however, Member States can restrict free movement according 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”*.⁷

As a consequence, smuggling of Nigerians through West and North Africa is often committed in the context of a migratory journey that also involves facilitation of regular travel. For this reason, 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) irregular entry; and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence according to the primary or secondary sources used.⁸

Many of the Nigerians interviewed in Nigeria in 2019 and 2021 had started their journey with valid travel documents – they mentioned the first step in their travel preparation as obtaining a passport from the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), indicating an intention to travel regularly, at least through the ECOWAS sub-region. Despite this, most of these interviewees had been the object of smuggling of migrant offences within West Africa or from West Africa to North Africa.

Smugglers are used by Nigerians within the ECOWAS sub-region because dangers along the routes, in the form of violence perpetrated by state or 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.

MOBILITY OF ECOWAS CITIZENS WITHIN ECOWAS REGION
(AND NORTH/CENTRAL AFRICAN COUNTRIES WITH VISA-FREE AGREEMENTS)



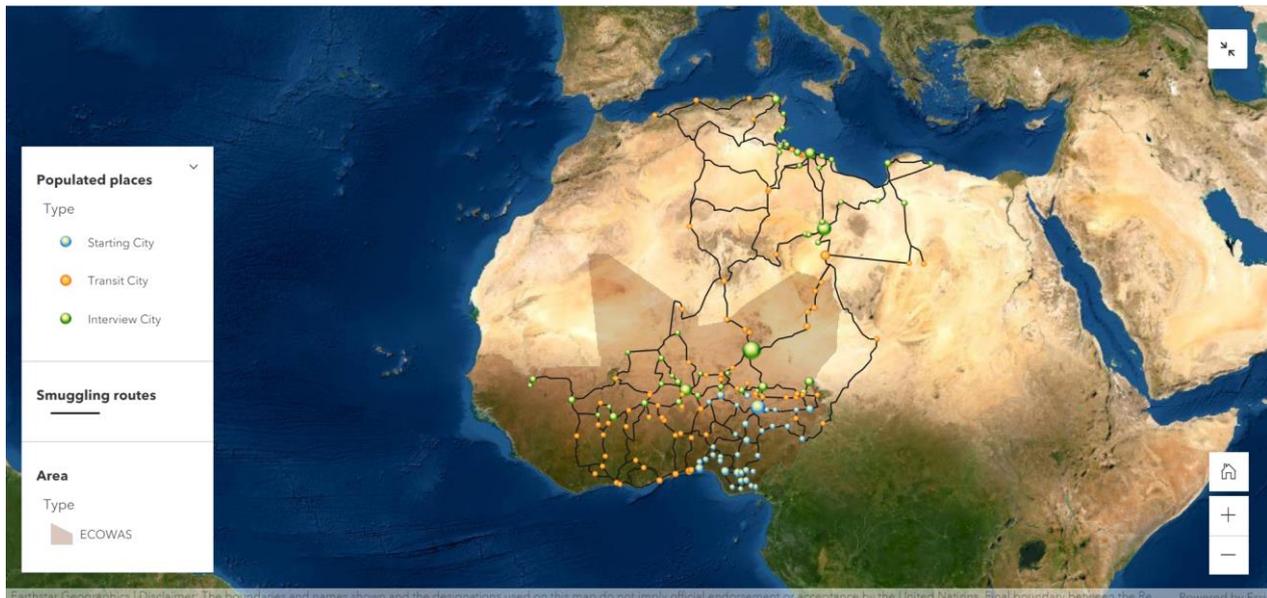
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Nigerians from all over the country embarking on a migration journey 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; 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.

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 South West 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 [capital of 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 Algeria or Libya.

The number of Nigerians smuggled through Mali, Mauritania and Algeria to Morocco is much lower, and very few Nigerians were recorded as using the Western Mediterranean and Northwest African (Atlantic) routes to Spain in recent years¹⁰ (see West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean).

Routes of Interviewed Nigerian Migrants from Place of Departure to Place of Interview, including transit point



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

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 South East 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, in some cases with the collusion of security personnel and ferry operators. According to a key informant interviewed in Imo State 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”.

Nigerian immigrants are among the largest and longest established immigrant communities in South Africa, and most arrive directly by air with a tourist visa, and therefore are not smuggled. Nigerians are among the top five nationalities applying for permanent residency in South Africa, with 7,590 applications between 2014 and 2019.¹¹ 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.

Due to recent changes in South African immigration policy, migrants to the country are now required to return to their country of origin to change their status, e.g. from a tourist visa to a student visa or work permit. Since the chances of obtaining a new visa are low, many remain without documentation, and in some cases this irregular stay may be facilitated by smugglers.¹² However, no data is available to confirm this. 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

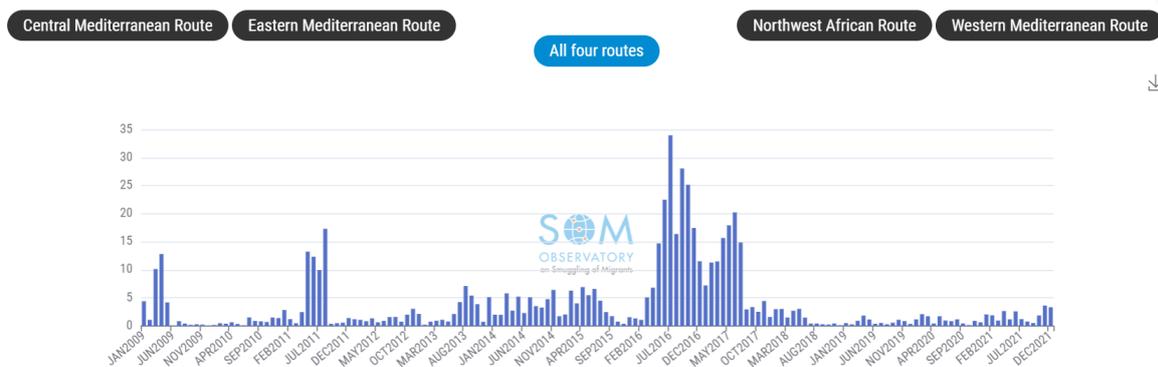
By Sea to Europe

In 2017, 18,260 Nigerians arrived irregularly in Europe, representing the largest group by nationality that year. However, every year since then, Nigerians have not featured in the top ten. During 2020-2021, the number of Nigerians arriving irregularly in Europe further declined. 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 2,348 Nigerians attempted to irregularly enter Europe by land and sea.¹⁵

Among the 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) arriving irregularly in Europe by sea and land 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 irregularly (62%) arrived by land from Turkey to Bulgaria and Greece, while 36% arrived by sea on the Central Mediterranean.¹⁶ Surveys conducted among migrants and refugees in Libya indicate that the majority use “travel facilitators,” with Nigerians relying more on smugglers than other migrants and refugees.¹⁷

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 elaborations on the basis of FRONTEX data.

The decline in numbers of Nigerians arriving along these routes does not necessarily signal a diminished demand for smuggler-facilitated journeys. Around 38,000 Nigerians were present in Libya in late 2020, with limited options for leaving Libya due to increased border controls on the Central Mediterranean Route.¹⁸ Many of these Nigerians, however, may not be in transit, but travelled to Libya to find work.

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 2019.¹⁹ Frontex points to the use of airports in Istanbul, Turkey and Casablanca, Morocco, as stop-overs on the way to European airports.²⁰ However, limited information is available in relation to smuggling by air, and the Observatory did not conduct field research at airports.

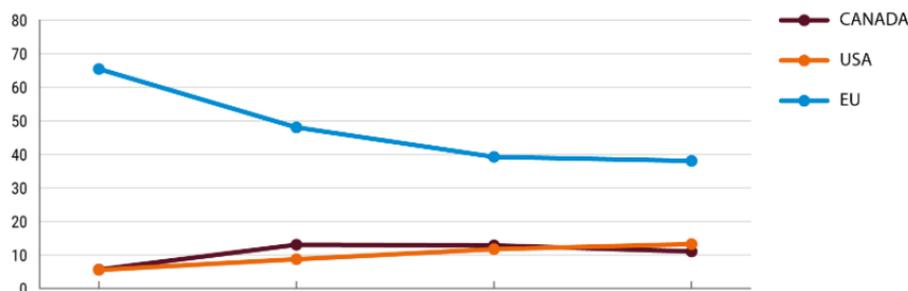
A mix of licit and illicit actors and activities is evident also in the context of regular and irregular, smuggler-facilitated migration to the Middle East. Particularly for Nigerians from Northern states, registered travel agents are involved in procuring visas and intermediating jobs, which may or may not result in labour or sexual exploitation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, Lebanon and Jordan. These agents collaborate with agencies in the destination countries, some of which pay for flights and other transportation costs.

Some work permits and visas for GCC countries, Lebanon and Jordan may be applied for by smugglers based on fictitious grounds. Other Nigerians enter with a short-term visa and remain and work in those countries with an undocumented status, which may in some cases involve the offence of enabling irregular stay. The irregular immigration status arises from the expiration of a visa, breaching the conditions of a visa, or leaving the designated employer under the *kafala* system regulating the issuance of work permits, where the worker is tied to a given employer leading to irregularity if they leave that employment.²¹

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).²² 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. Some Nigerians who apply for asylum use smugglers to travel to the country where the application is lodged. According to Europol, migrant smugglers may use asylum procedures as part of their modus operandi, advising migrants and refugees

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



UNODC Elaboration of UNHCR Refugee Statistics.

to apply for asylum in Europe.²³ Court cases from jurisdictions in the US and Canada also provide evidence of a similar modus operandi.²⁴

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).²⁵ A small number of Nigerians have also applied for asylum in North African

countries, with totals for the period 2018–mid-2020 of 629 in Morocco, 307 in Algeria and 54 in Tunisia, though they may have travelled by land or by air.²⁶

Smuggling into and through Nigeria

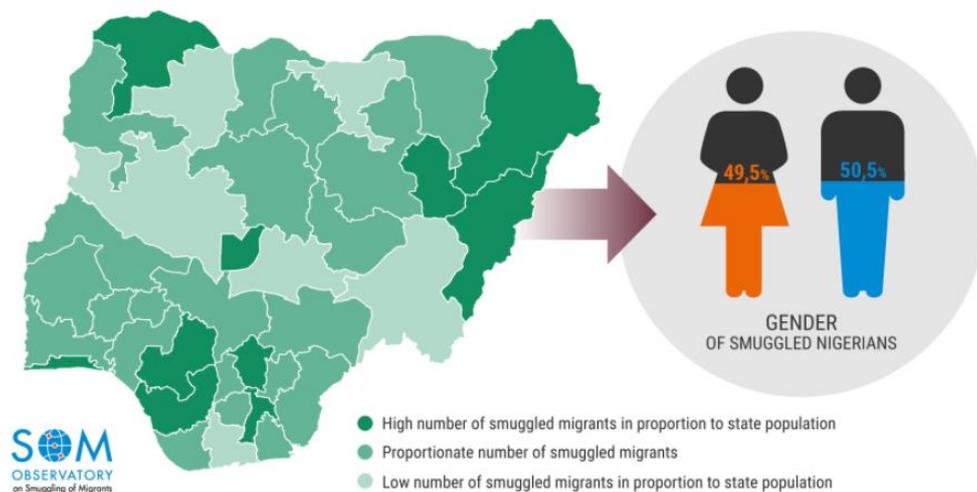
Limited information was obtained during the research on smuggling into and through Nigeria, specifically in relation to Cameroonians and Central Africans (CAR). Citizens of these two countries may be smuggled into Nigeria, as a destination country, or through Nigeria, *en route* elsewhere. They are smuggled into the South East zone of Nigeria from Cameroon. Those in transit are then 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

PROFILES OF NIGERIANS WHO USE SMUGGLERS

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



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on surveys conducted during 2021 with Nigerians on the move in Burkina Faso (62), Libya (299), Mali (72), Niger (250) and Tunisia (63), in partnership with the Mixed Migration Centre. 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.

While Nigerian girls, boys, women and men are the object of smuggling of migrants offences, the largest proportion are men. For Phase 3 of this research, however, additional efforts were

made to interview adult women, as well as adult men (see [Methodology](#) for more details), in order to better understand gender-specific aspects of migrant smuggling. Based on the qualitative interviews conducted during Phases 1 and 2 of this research, smuggled Nigerians are usually aged 16-35 years old, though there is evidence of Nigerians as young as eight years old and as old as 63 being smuggled.

Among Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries in 2021 during Phase 3 of the research, there were relatively higher numbers of people from the South-South 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 in almost every state in the Federation.

Drivers of Migrant Smuggling

Nigerians on the move who were surveyed for the Observatory in 2021 were asked about their use of smugglers and travel facilitators. 75% 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. 85% 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 do not have access to safe and legal migration alternatives. 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."

30% 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%). Just 18% of this group tried fleeing to a place of safety within their country (internal refuge) and 13% tried to migrate abroad regularly. Obtaining visas and flight tickets is perceived as a privilege that is beyond the bounds of possibility. A Nigerian market woman interviewed in Edo State in 2021 discussed the risks of smuggling with local people at a community meeting. One participant said to her:

"You are saying that they should not go through Libya, where else should they go through? It's not everyone that can afford to get a visa and plane tickets."

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. 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 necessary protect Nigerians from such risks (see [Abuses](#) section below), but nevertheless 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, just 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.

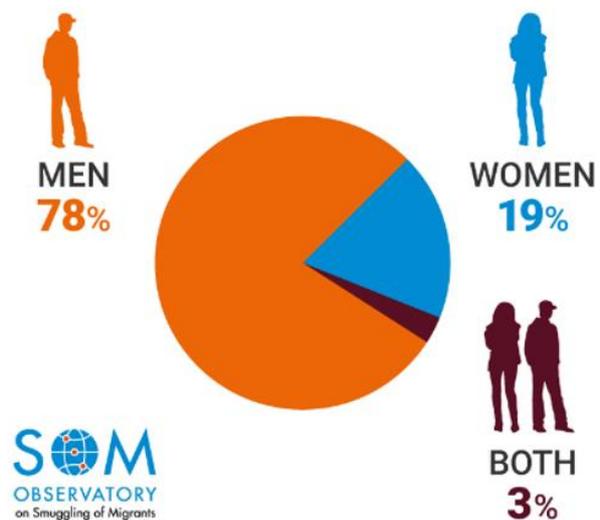
3. Smugglers

Who are the smugglers?

Most smugglers of Nigerians on the various routes are men, with Nigerians surveyed in 2021 indicating that around one in five smugglers are women.²⁷ Similarly, most local agents organizing regular and irregular journeys to the Middle East, as well as those involved in trafficking in persons on these routes, are Nigerian men, often with office premises in Kano and other states in the North West zone.

Key informants interviewed in Nigeria in 2019 and 2021 referred to both male and female smugglers. The age of smugglers varies, though few, if any, children are involved (under 18 years). While many offenders are in their twenties, some are much older, aged between 30 and 60 years, according to interviewees in Nigeria. Perpetrators of smuggling in Nigeria, and of Nigerians, are commonly of Nigerian nationality. However, in some cases, Nigerian smugglers work in coordination with Cameroonians and other West Africans (from Benin, Ghana, Niger, Senegal, and Togo).

GENDER OF SMUGGLERS



Modus Operandi of Smugglers

Smuggling of Nigerians and through Nigeria is perpetrated by various different actors, located somewhere along a spectrum that ranges from highly organized and sophisticated to low-level

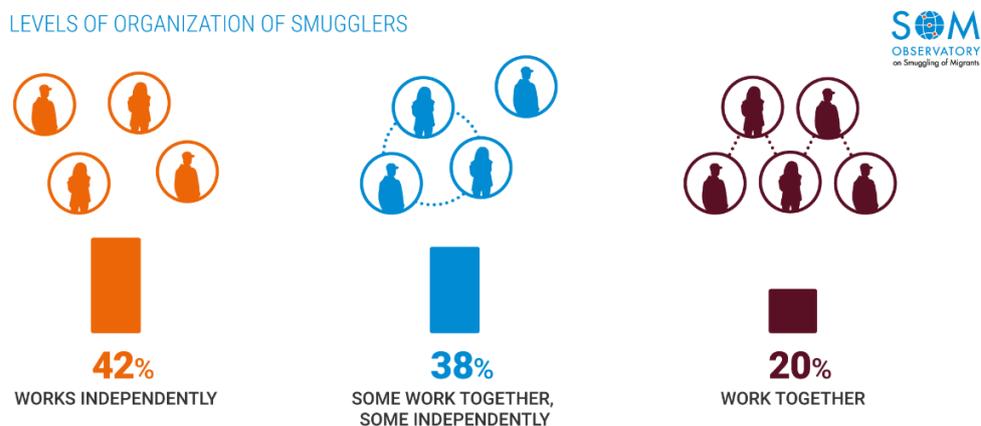
individual actors making *ad hoc* connections. Law enforcement officers interviewed in Nigeria in 2021 and 2019 had more experience with larger smuggling groups, involving up to 14 perpetrators, with distinct hierarchies. Europol’s European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) refers to well-developed networks of Nigerian migrant smugglers operating on mixed migration routes.²⁸

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 (see West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean).²⁹ A recent IOM study on migration in West and North Africa finds that most smugglers work as part of a network, with some able to coordinate travel from the point of origin to Europe and others able to rely on connections with other smugglers.³⁰

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.³¹ This difference in perspective is described by a Nigerian investigator interviewed in 2019: “[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% used one

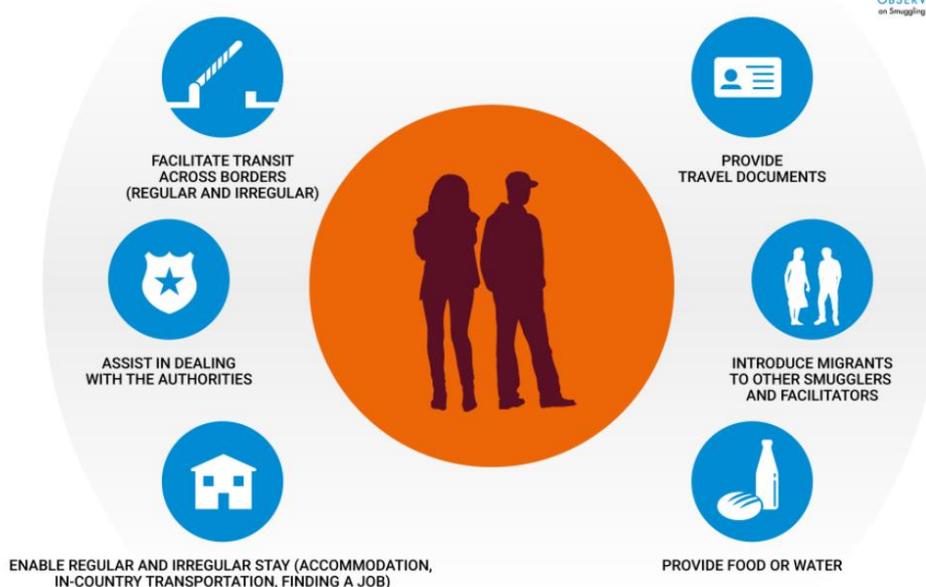
smuggler or facilitator for the entire journey, with others using a smuggler or facilitator for part of the journey (31%) or using several smugglers



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).

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 corrupt authorities on migrants’ behalf; and “connection men” or coordinators, who organize the smuggling group.

SERVICES OFFERED BY SMUGGLERS AND FACILITATORS



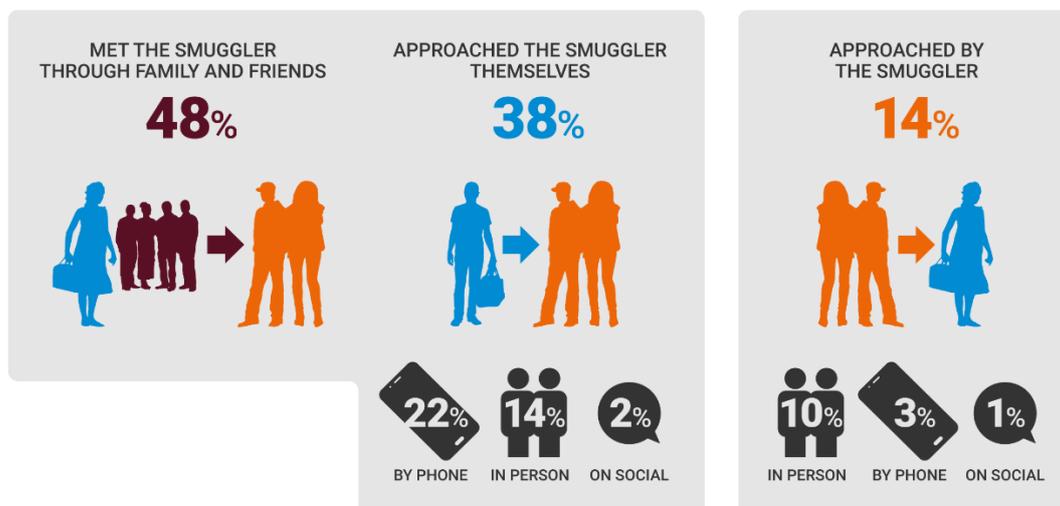
Smuggling organizers are exclusively Nigerian men, and often referred to as **Connection Men**. Local agents in states of origin, transporters and other smuggling actors receive instructions from *Connection Men* over the phone, informing them about the next steps. Nigerian smuggling organizers are often based in Libya. One Nigerian man interviewed in Edo State 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 sex trafficking 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] drivers, keke [rickshaw] and motorbike riders”.

The first step in the smuggling process is for **local agents** to get in contact with potential clients. Key to understanding the relationship is that smugglers rarely approach clients directly, but rather their services are sought out by intending migrants and people already on the move. The exception is in the case of some Nigerian women, who described themselves or their family members being approached on the street with offers to travel abroad. This may be an indicator that the smuggler is also intending to traffic these women (see [Aggravated Smuggling Offences](#) below).

Just one in seven Nigerians surveyed in transit and destination countries in 2021 were approached directly by smugglers or facilitators in person, by phone, or on social media. However, there is a very important gender distinction in relation to the first contact with local smuggling agents. 22% of Nigerian women surveyed were approached by local smugglers or facilitators, 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. This is an indication of a higher level of vulnerability to human trafficking and other abuses on the part of smuggled Nigerian women.

FIRST CONTACT OF MIGRANTS WITH SMUGGLERS



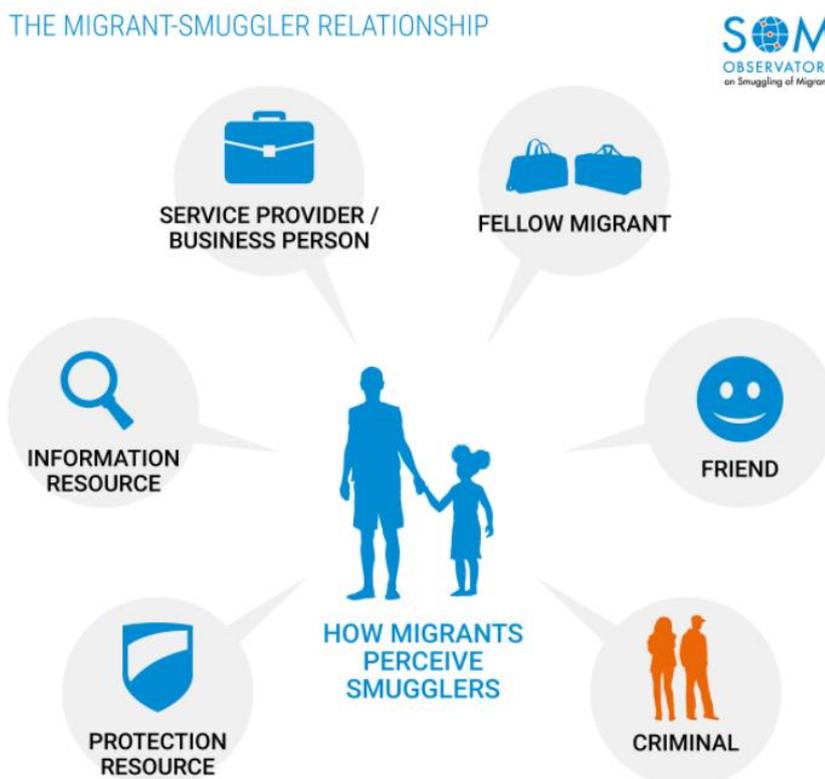
Based on evidence from all three phases of this research, intending Nigerian migrants commonly identify a local smuggling agent through relatives or friends in Nigeria or abroad, or word-of-mouth in their state of origin or residence. Relatives or friends may simply provide them with a local number for 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.

In many instances, Nigerians then travel regularly through the ECOWAS sub-region, using smugglers only at the point of crossing into North Africa. However, Nigerians from the Southern states in particular are often in contact with smugglers from the beginning of their journeys, due to the established migrant communities from these states in key North African

and European countries along the routes, as well as, in some cases, the link with sex trafficking of Nigerian women and girls along these routes (see Abuses section).

72% of those 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

THE MIGRANT-SMUGGLER RELATIONSHIP



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 2% 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.³²

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, they are referred to as “Burgers.” Some are themselves former migrants. An interviewee in 2019 from a local 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.³³

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 market woman interviewed in Edo 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.”

In the case of larger groups of more organized smugglers, as well as *ad hoc* arrangements, 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. These agents receive a payment from *Connection Men* for these initial contacts and may provide intending migrants with assistance in obtaining legitimate or fraudulent travel documentation.

Smuggling of Migrants and Related Offences

Facilitation of irregular entry for profit

The smuggling of migrants offence is constituted when a perpetrator facilitates another person's irregular entry into a country, in return for a financial or material benefit. Smuggling actors involved in transporting Nigerians across borders are referred to as “**crossers**” or “*Trolleys*.” They pick up intending migrants at motor-parks in Kano and other cities in the North West, and are often paid by the local agents in states of origin rather than directly by migrants.

According to officials from the Nigerian Union for Road and Transport Workers (NURTW) interviewed in Kano in 2019, smugglers regularly change meeting points with clients and use different motor parks, in order to evade law enforcement operations. While some travel facilitators may be assisting Nigerians 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 2021 described how, rather than take a direct bus from Benin City 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.

Both smugglers and community networks play an important role in the choice of route, with 34% of those surveyed in 2021 stating that their route was chosen by the smuggler or facilitator and 40% stating that friends or family had suggested it. A further 28% 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.

Nigerians surveyed in countries of transit and destination in 2021 most commonly cited the border from Nigeria to Niger Republic (66%) - which is within the ECOWAS free movement zone – as the border for which a crossing was facilitated. Therefore, 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. However, 45% 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 may be transported across the border together with other goods, like fruit and vegetables.

A key informant interviewed in Delta State in 2021 described how migrants travel within Nigeria on crowded “*luxurious buses with attached people [carrying other people on their laps] 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 2019 described her experience of crossing the Nigeria-Niger border on a motorbike:

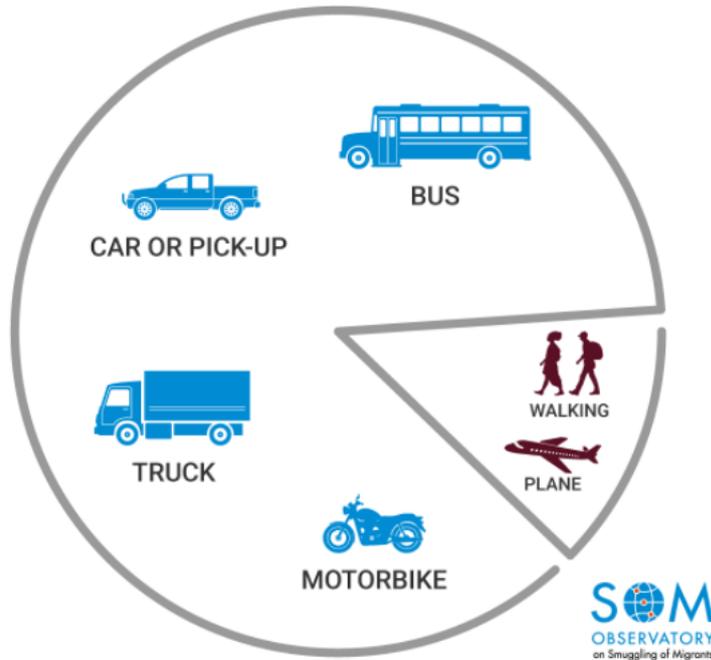
“I fell down three times from the motorcycle that was used to convey us [five people] from Katsina [Nigeria] to Zinder [Niger] due to apparent exhaustion [...]. I could remember that one of us was left behind eventually beside the road with severe bruises.”

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.³⁴ From Agadez, larger groups of Nigerians and other migrants 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.³⁵ 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 happens.

MODES OF TRANSPORT



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 interviewed in Libya, however, were slightly more likely to have walked (17%) and travelled by plane (5%), although the main modes of transport remained road vehicles.

Enabling irregular stay for the purpose of smuggling

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.

This is especially important as journeys from Nigeria to countries in North Africa may take months or even years, creating a significant demand for accommodation along the route. Nigerians spend time in hubs along the routes waiting for onward travel and/or earning money to pay for the next stage of the journey. A key informant interviewed in Kano in 2021 described smugglers' activities:

“there are agents in Kano who help the migrants when they get to Kano. They pick them up at the [motor] parks, and provide them with accommodation based on the instructions and payment from the travel agent in the state of origin. There is also another person in Libya and in Europe who would receive the migrant.”

“**Safe houses**” run by smugglers accommodate between 10 and 100 people, close to border crossings or at important migration hubs, such as Kano and Katsina, Nigeria and 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 and 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, either legally or fraudulently. While many Nigerians travel within the ECOWAS sub-region with valid documents, 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 individuals to cross border crossing points in North Africa.³⁶ 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. 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.³⁷ 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 labour exploitation, sexual exploitation and domestic servitude in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Lebanon and Jordan.

Corruption

Research carried out by the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants since its inception in 2019 has continuously shown that “where there is smuggling, there is corruption.” Bribes are requested by public officials both within a country (by 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 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 express purpose of paying bribes, even if they had valid travel documentation. The amount of the bribe requested is subject to negotiation, and smugglers may be able to negotiate a form of group discount.

At some locations along smuggling routes from Nigeria to North Africa, sustained bribery systems have been maintained between public officials at checkpoints and smugglers, favoring the perpetration of smuggling along these routes. 44% of Nigerians surveyed in countries of transit and destination in 2021 stated that public officials had neither been involved in, nor did they facilitate migrant smuggling. 41% said that this had taken place once, occasionally or frequently on their journey, while 16% did not know.

A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo in 2021 was travelling north to Kano in the company of a smuggling guide, intending to be smuggled through Libya to Germany. The guide was apprehended by the Nigeria Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) in possession of drugs:

“On our way, we were stopped by NDLEA. They searched every one of us and they didn't find anything, but on the Burger [guide] they found Indian hemp [...]. The officers arrested everyone that was in the bus and we were told to bail ourselves out. We begged them till they agreed to let us all go, except for the Burger. We couldn't leave him behind because he's the connection. Within ourselves we gathered 22,000 Naira [US\$57]. The officers collected the money, then took the Burger to the back of the building. They had a little discussion, after that we were on our way again.”

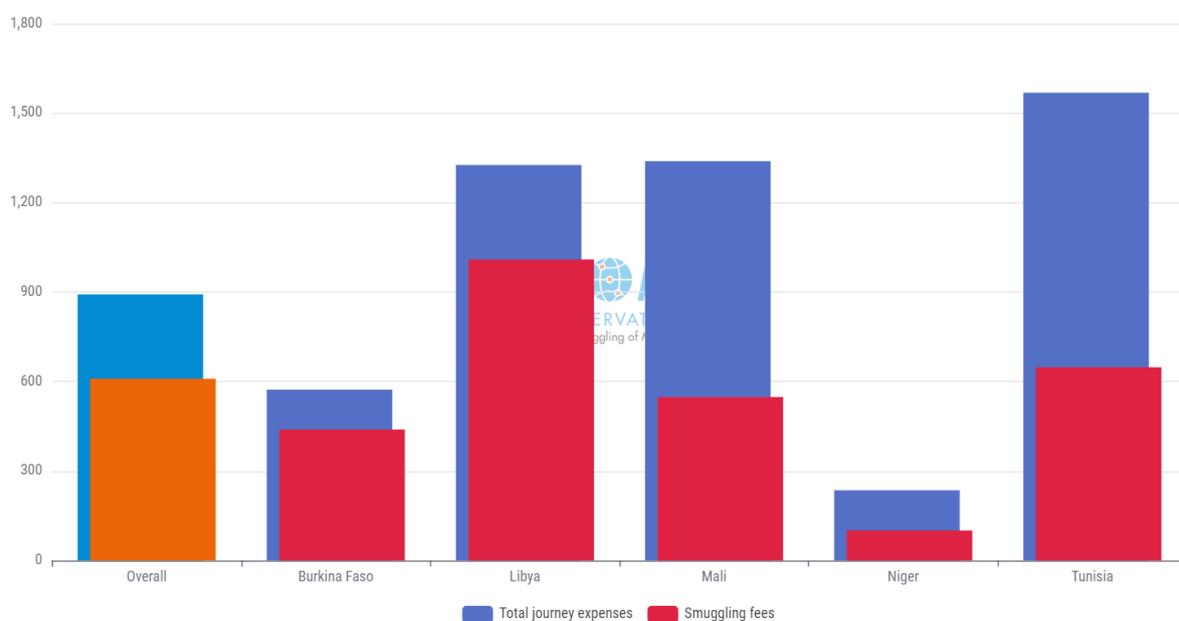
Corruption also manifests itself in the impunity enjoyed by certain smugglers and smuggling groups. For example, a Nigerian man planning to migrate, interviewed in Kano, Nigeria in 2021, scoffed at the thought of Nigerians who have suffered abuse at the hands of their smugglers getting justice:

“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?”

4. Fees, Proceeds and Payments

Fees

Smuggling fees as proportion of total journey expenditure



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

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, 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 in 2021 paid 350,000 Naira [US\$840] for his wife to be smuggled from Edo 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.

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 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 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.³⁸ For example, a key informant interviewed in Kano in 2021 mentioned a price of 10,000 Naira [US\$24] per person for irregularly crossing the Nigeria-Niger border by motorbike from Katsina state.

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 the smuggling of migrants. A key informant interviewed in Edo in 2021 mentioned a smuggler working at a local barber's shop 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 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 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 sex trafficking (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. 12% were intending to pay in full at the destination and an additional 9% upon service delivery. As a possible indicator of labour exploitation and/or trafficking for forced labour, 17% had paid in kind with their labour. 10% 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 terms of 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 (6% vs. 3%).

Smuggling fees are usually paid in cash to local agents in the state of origin in Nigeria. In exchange, intending migrants receive the phone number(s) of smuggler(s) based further along the route towards Libya. Upfront payments are funded through savings, sale of assets (including land and livestock) and loans, often involving other members of the intending migrant’s families. A specific means of payment was mentioned by just one key informant in Kano in 2021, in the context of the local “wafar” system of travel organization: *“Wafar is like a bank where they engage in exchange of money with no account statement or traces of fund exchange.”*

Nigerians on the move surveyed in 2021 mostly financed their journeys through their own funds or savings (49%), with their family paying (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 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 Lagos in 2019 had saved 300,000 Naira [US\$720] over the course of six months, which he paid to a local smuggling agent who worked with a Nigerian smuggling organizer in Libya. A man interviewed in Imo in 2019 received help from his family members in financing the journey: *“my people [family] invested a total of 400,000 Naira [US\$960] through my brother who made the connection with the agent in Owerri [Imo].”* The family members of another man interviewed in Kano in 2019 organized the smuggling and were in contact with the smuggling on his behalf. A 2019 study conducted in Southwestern Nigeria corroborates these findings of how migration decisions often feature in families’ planning processes to ensure their livelihoods.³⁹

A gender distinction in terms of debts incurred is indicative of smugglers also being involved in perpetrating trafficking in persons (see [Abuses](#) section below). Some Nigerians go into debt with the smuggler, agreeing to pay off the debt through their labor or a percentage of their earnings on arrival in 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 the destination country in North Africa, Europe or the Middle East. In Delta and Edo States, women more commonly swear oaths and agree to repay the smuggling fee in Europe than men.

32% 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 getting 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 for debt bondage, or borrowed money from other migrants (6%). Still others reported sex/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 money responded that they provided sexual services/were sexually abused as payments, 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, as 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 informal market, either finding work independently or the smuggler brokers employment with third parties, and 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’s Rights

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 applies to 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.

PERPETRATORS OF ABUSES

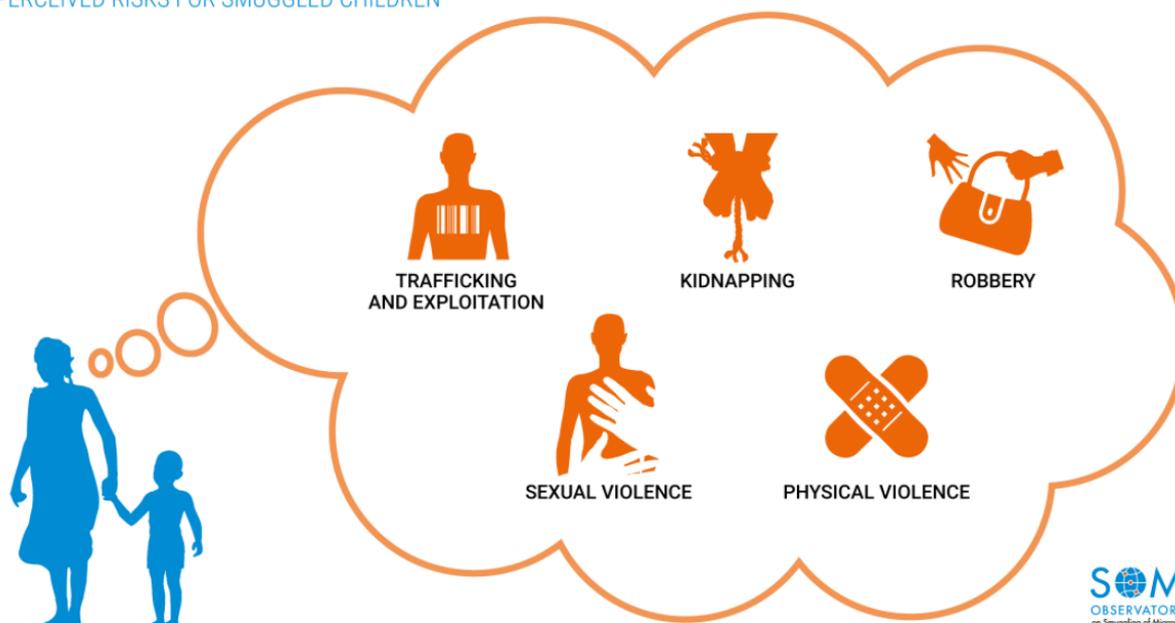


In the context of smuggling, human rights abuses are perpetrated by both smugglers and other actors against smuggled Nigerians. When Nigerians surveyed in 2021 were asked about personally experiencing abuses during the journey, almost half cited physical violence, one in four detention, and one in five sexual violence, and kidnapping.

While no children were interviewed for this research for ethical reasons (see [Methodology](#)), Nigerian adults participating in the surveys in 2021 were asked about what they perceived as the risks for smuggled children on these routes (see infographic below).⁴⁰

48% cited trafficking and exploitation, 30% cited kidnapping, 28% physical violence, 27% sexual violence, and 24% 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.”⁴¹

The evidence on human rights abuses perpetrated by smugglers against Nigerians, some of which may constitute aggravated smuggling offences, is mixed. It is interesting to note that 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 migrant impact the vulnerability of a migrant to abuses.

In some cases, smugglers receive the 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.

71% of Nigerians surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that the smuggler or facilitator had helped them to achieve their migration goal, with just 13% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with this statement. Conversely, 22% of Nigerians surveyed strongly agreed or agreed 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, and other potential competing smugglers while *en route*. Smuggled Nigerians who were subject to deprivation of 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 of Nigerian migrants 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 providing transportation services claim not to have been paid and deliver people to detention camps or situations of forced labour. A Nigerian man interviewed in Delta 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 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. The conditions in the desert and at sea present serious risks to the life and safety of smuggled Nigerians, as well as risks from violent smugglers who kill “*any of the victims that 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. One Nigerian man described how they 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 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 migrants whose mothers and fathers had died in the Mediterranean Sea.*”

Nigerian women and girls in particular are 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, smuggling and 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.

One potential case of trafficking for sexual exploitation by a smuggler involved two Nigerian women from Jos, Plateau State, one of whom 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 female smuggler, who sent a man to transfer them to another smuggler who drove them to a village in the neighbouring state of Katsina. On arrival there, they were collected by a man on a motorbike and taken to accommodation where around 50 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 to 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. 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, Niger and Chad. In the detention context, Nigerians are subjected to regular physical violence, sexual abuse and torture (e.g., coerced into maintaining stressful positions over longer durations of time). 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 in order to be released. Particularly in Libya, smuggled Nigerians are at risk of unlawful killing and kidnapping for ransom by Libyan actors. If they or their families back home are not able to pay the ransom demanded, they may be killed.

A key informant spoke of Nigerians in Libya being hijacked on the roads, kidnapped, sold and subjected to forced labour. As of November 2019, there were eight ongoing criminal investigations in Benin City, Edo State, of extortion of relatives of people from the state who were illegally detained abroad. In the few cases where extortion schemes were unsuccessful, Nigerians were forced to pay off their “debt” by working either within the detention facility or in the surrounding community.⁴²

State and non-state actors subject smuggled Nigerians to physical and sexual violence during the smuggling journey. Smuggled Nigerian women and girls 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 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 subjected to exploitation. 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, interviewed in Delta in 2021, worked at a carwash in Libya in order to pay the fees for the smuggling journey by sea to Italy, but was not paid. He managed to exit the situation but was apprehended by other Libyans who put 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 “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 labor 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. One 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 for 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

The Nigerian Immigration Act No. 8 of 2015 sets out 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). As an ECOWAS Member State, Nigeria is covered by the ECOWAS Protocols on Free Movement (see [Routes](#) section). Nigeria adopted its National Migration Policy in 2015, which sets out, *inter alia*, the policy framework for combating smuggling of migrants in Nigeria.⁴³

The Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) is responsible for controlling Nigeria’s borders, at the five international airports (Abuja, Enugu, Kano, Lagos, and Port Harcourt), six seaports (in Lagos, Cross River, Rivers and Delta States)⁴⁴ and 114 official land border crossings. 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.⁴⁵ No data is available for crossings at informal border crossing points along Nigeria's land borders.

In order to prevent and combat smuggling of migrants, the NIS cooperates at the national level as necessary 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 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 arrested 22 Nigerians for migrant smuggling in 2018: 4 in Edo State, 4 in Kano, 1 in Katsina and 13 in Seme, Lagos State, at the border with Benin Republic.⁴⁶ Most cases prosecuted in recent years have related to the provision of fraudulent documents in procuring passports, which in some cases may involve migrant smugglers.⁴⁷ The Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics records 209 migrants with an irregular status intercepted in 2018, and 34 suspected migrant smugglers arrested. Suspected migrant smugglers were arrested in Seme, Lagos (13), Niger (12), Kano (4) and Edo (4). Most of the irregular migrants were intercepted in Niger, Adamawa and Kano, followed by Edo and Kaduna.⁴⁸

In order to increase its capacity to prosecute immigration-related offences, including smuggling of migrants, NIS has recruited additional staff for the legal unit, most of whom are posted outside headquarters, in Nigeria's eight geopolitical zones.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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 the International Airport in Kano 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.

A Nigerian man interviewed in Edo State in 2021 described how his smuggler told him to remain in Asaba, 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.

A particular challenge is presented in Nigeria by counter-smuggling efforts that take the approach of preventing Nigerians from leaving the "country," rather than pursuing criminal smuggling actors. Some Nigerian law enforcement officers identify and intercept Nigerian citizens who are 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.

Aside from not being in line with the spirit and the letter of the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, and representing a violation of rights, denial of passport applications may inadvertently promote 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, as long as they cross at an official internal ECOWAS border crossing point and with a passport or other valid travel document.

7. Methodology

As in all of the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants research, this StoryMap is based on the application of the comprehensive 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 Nigerians' use of migrant smuggling 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 Lagos, Kano, Edo and Imo. 14 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 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 under 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 representing 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 involved reviewing reports from other international organizations produced over the last five years. Academic articles published in peer-reviewed journals were also considered and referenced where relevant. The desk research also included analysis of data sources provided by the Nigeria Immigration Service, the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, IOM, UNHCR, Frontex, and Eurostat. Where relevant, data was analyzed and used to triangulate and substantiate main points of the research.

End Notes

¹ UN DESA estimates, 2019.

² As of 2018/2019. Household survey data from the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics published in 2020 and cited in: <https://databank.worldbank.org/>.

³ www.internal-displacement.org/countries/nigeria, as of 31 December 2021.

⁴ 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*. World Bank, Washington, DC: <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 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%2021-02-2022.pdf>.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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>

⁸ See UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants. www.unodc.org/res/som/.

- ⁹ ICMPD & IOM (2015). *A Survey on Migration Policies in West Africa*. Vienna: ICMPD; Westh Olsen, Anne Sofie (2011). *Reconsidering West African Migrations: Changing Focus from European Immigration to Intra-Regional Flows*. DIIS Working Paper 2011:11; Ademola, Adedeji (2016). "Nigeria-Ghana trade relations: Politics, problems and possibilities." *Developing Country Studies*, 6(1); Adeniran, Isaac Adebusuyi (2017). "The Migration and Integration of EjigboYoruba in Cote d'Ivoire." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 26(2): 144–157; Yaro, J. A. (2008). *Migration in West Africa: Patterns, issues and challenges*. Centre for Migration Studies. Legon: University of Ghana.
- ¹⁰ UNODC (2018). *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants*.
- ¹¹ www.parliament.gov.za/news/fraudulent-permanent-residence-applications-put-pressure-systems
- ¹² Akanle, O., Alemu, A. E., & Adesina, J. O. (2016). "The existentialities of Ethiopian and Nigerian migrants in South Africa." *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies-Multi-, Inter-and Transdisciplinarity*, 11(2), 139-158.
- 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>.
- ¹⁵ UNODC calculations based on Frontex Monthly Detections of IBC Data, downloaded from: <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>.
- ¹⁶ During 2021, 1,443 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/>.
- ¹⁷ International Organization for Migration (2021). *Libya – Closely Knit: An Assessment of Migrants' Social Networks in Libya*.
- ¹⁸ International Organization for Migration (2020). *Libya's Migrant Report*.
- ¹⁹ Frontex (2020). Annual Risk Analysis; European Migrant Smuggling Centre (2020) 4th Annual Activity Report.
- ²⁰ Frontex (2020). Annual Risk Analysis.
- ²¹ 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.
- ²² www.icirnigeria.org/why-uae-refuses-work-permit-applications-from-nigerians/; <http://saharareporters.com/2021/06/29/exclusive-uae-suspends-direct-employment-visa-nigerians-over-rising-crimes>.
- ²³ European Migration Smuggling Centre (2020). *4th Activity Report*; European Migrant Smuggling Centre (2018). *3rd Activity Report*.
- ²⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2015 CanLII 30379 (CA IRB); Canada, Federal Court, 2012 FC 1098; United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, Adejimi v. AG United States, No. 18-2664.
- ²⁵ www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/.
- ²⁶ www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/.
- ²⁷ While an option for a gender other than female or male was provided in the 2021 surveys of Nigerians under Phase 3, only male and female smugglers were indicated by research participants.
- ²⁸ EMSC (2020). *4th Activity Report*.
- ²⁹ UNODC (2018). *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants*.
- ³⁰ IOM (2020). *Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean*.
- ³¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018). *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants*; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011). *The Role of Organized Crime in the Smuggling of Migrants from West Africa to the European Union*.
- ³² See: Mixed Migration Centre (2021). *Smuggling and mixed migration: Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection*. <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/smuggling-and-mixed-migration/>.

³³ On “migrants as smugglers” in the context of the Balkan mixed migration routes, see: Karolina Augustova, Helena Carrapico & Jelena Obradović-Wochnik (2021). “Becoming a Smuggler: Migration and Violence at EU External Borders.” *Geopolitics*.

³⁴ See Micallef, Mark *et al* (2021). *Conflict, Coping and Covid: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020*. Global Initiative on Transnational Organized Crime. Tahoua’s increasing significance is not reflected in IOM data on Nigerian migrants departing from Kano and Sokoto, who are primarily headed towards Zinder and Maradi in Niger. <https://migration.iom.int/reports/nigeria-%E2%80%94-flow-monitoring-dashboard-49-january-march-2021>.

³⁵ See also: Frontex AFIC (2017). *Africa-Frontex 2016 Intelligence Community Joint Report*.

³⁶ Interpol, 2018, *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in North Africa*.

³⁷ United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, *Adejimi v. AG United States*, No. 18-2664.

³⁸ On “pay-as-you-go” smuggling, see, *inter alia*: UNODC (2018). *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants*; Adesina, Olubukola S. (2021). “Libya and African Migration to Europe” in: Abegunrin, O. and Abidde, S.O. (eds.), *African Migrants and the Refugee Crisis*. Springer Nature Switzerland, pp. 219-240; Sanchez, Gabriella (2020). *Beyond militias and tribes: The facilitation of migration in Libya*. San Domenico de Fiesole: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. RSCAS, 9. (working paper); McAuliffe, M.L and Laczko, F. (2016). *Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base*. Geneva: IOM; Reitano, T., & Tinti, P. (2015). *Survive and advance: the economics of smuggling refugees and migrants into Europe*. Institute for Security Studies Papers, 2015(289); Alberola, C., & Janssen, C. (2019). *Action Knowledge Transfer on Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking by Air and Document Fraud*. New York: UNU MERIT; Optimity Advisors, ICMPD and ECRE (2015). *A study on smuggling of migrants: Characteristics, responses and cooperation with third countries*. For the European Migration Network (EMN). Brussels: European Commission; Healy, Claire (2019). *The Strength to Carry On: Resilience and Vulnerability to Trafficking and Other Abuses among People Travelling along Migration Routes to Europe*. Vienna: ICMPD.

³⁹ Akanle, O. *et al* (2019). “International Migration, Kinship Networks and Social Capital in Southwestern Nigeria.” *Journal of Borderland Studies*.

⁴⁰ On the experiences of Nigerian children in the context of the Central Mediterranean route during the years when higher numbers of Nigerians were travelling along this route (2015-2016), see, *inter alia*: Save the Children Italia onlus (2016). *Tiny Invisible Slaves: Child Victims of Trafficking and Exploitation: Who They Are, Where They Come from and Who is Profiting from them*; IOM (2016). *Assessing the Risks of Migration along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean Routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries*.

⁴¹ Quotation from a key informant interviewed in Delta State, Nigeria, in 2021.

⁴² See also: United Nations Support Mission in Libya and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (2018) *Desperate and Dangerous: Report on the Human Rights Situation of Migrants in Libya*; Malakooti, Arezo (2019) *The Political Economy of Migrant Detention in Libya*.

⁴³ Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015, *National Migration Policy*.

⁴⁴ Lagos, Tin Can Island, Calabar, Rivers, Delta and Onne Ports.

⁴⁵ Nigerian Immigration Service *Annual Report 2018*.

⁴⁶ Nigeria Immigration Service, 2018, *Annual Report*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ See Nigerian Immigration Service Annual Report, 2018 at 110

⁴⁸ NBS (2019). *2018 Immigration Statistics*.

⁴⁹ See NIS Annual Report, 2018

⁵⁰ 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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