



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

GLOBAL STUDY ON  
**SMUGGLING  
OF MIGRANTS**

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THE AMERICAS

UNODC  
Research

## THE AMERICAS

### Northward – through Central America and Mexico to the United States



The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

#### Profile of migrants:

Northward: Mostly migrants from Central America and Mexico. Significant numbers of unaccompanied migrant children – mainly boys - from the main origin countries.

Southward: Migrants from the Caribbean; significant though far smaller numbers of a range of African and Asian smuggled migrants. Many smuggled women migrants.

#### Human cost:

A variety of risks, including death, extortion, kidnapping, trafficking in persons, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest and incarceration, torture and environmental exposure.

#### Profile of smugglers:

Throughout the continent, most smugglers operate on a small scale within their communities and abroad mainly by mobilizing personal connections. The vast majority has no criminal background. Large and violent criminal groups seem not to be involved in the actual smuggling, however benefiting from it by imposing a 'tax' on the migrants passage.

#### Organization:

Thousands of small-scale, community-based smugglers who are informally networked and provide services locally,

and on occasion, partner with other smugglers or groups with contacts in other countries. On the northward route, in particular, also some larger smuggling organizations.

## PATTERNS AND TRENDS OF MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN THE AMERICAS

As in most parts of the world, migrant smuggling routes in the Americas are flexible and subject to rapid and significant changes. Two predominant broad routes can nonetheless be discerned. The first is a relatively clear-cut northward route that connects flows from many locations in South and Central America, proceeds through Central American countries, leading into Mexico and finally to the United States of America (and Canada). The second is a multi-destination southward route into and within South America.

The northward route – with the United States as the final destination – tends to be travelled primarily by Central Americans and decreasing numbers of Mexican citizens.<sup>1</sup> Migrants along this route travel mostly by land and air, and to a lesser degree by sea. While in the past, individual migrants might have crossed the United States-Mexico border irregularly on their own, following the significant

build-up in security along the border, such crossings have largely disappeared. Migrants now routinely seek the assistance of smugglers.<sup>2</sup>

Southward migrant smuggling into and within South America takes place via land, air and sea. Within the framework of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) economic cooperation agreement, many South Americans can transit freely and obtain legal residence within any of the participating countries.<sup>3</sup> These privileges are not extended to newly arrived citizens from non-member countries, however. Many persons from the Caribbean enter South America irregularly; with or without facilitation.<sup>3</sup> Many of them intend to reach the United States, and use South America primarily as a transit area.<sup>b</sup> Arrivals from the Middle East, Africa and Asia have also led to the increased visibility of extra-continental<sup>c</sup> smuggled migrants.<sup>4</sup> Some of these extra-continental migrants may fly to a South American country, connect with smugglers and join the northward flow in order to reach the United States. Others stay in South America; some also apply for international protection.

While the exact number of migrants who travel irregularly across and into the Americas is unknown, it is believed that the majority travel with the assistance of smugglers at some point of their journeys. Some use smugglers along some travel segments, while others may afford to hire them for the entire trip in an attempt to avoid detection, violence and arrest. Along the northward route, it is estimated that between 200,000 and 400,000 Central American migrants are smuggled across Mexico every year en route to the United States.<sup>5</sup>

## THE NORTHWARD ROUTE: FROM CENTRAL AMERICA INTO MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

### The main smuggling hubs, departure and arrival points

Central America is the key origin area, as well as a transit area for smuggled migrants travelling northwards overland towards the United States. The South American migrants

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- a As of November 2017, the countries for which free movement mechanisms are in force are Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. MERCOSUR, *Residir y Trabajar en el MERCOSUR*, available at: <http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/v/6425/4/innova.front/residir-y-trabajar-en-el-mercosur>.
- b In recent years, different South American countries, including Colombia, Peru and Brazil, are turning into countries of destination for smuggled migrants.
- c Extra-continental smuggling refers to arrivals from outside the Americas.

who make use of this route have often travelled via Colombia or Ecuador, before reaching Central America by land (or air). There are specific areas in all major cities in Central America serving as smuggling hubs for citizens of these countries, many of whom travel from smaller communities in the interior to join others traveling from the cities.

A key smuggling hub in the journeys of Central Americans is the region along Mexico's borders with Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, Belize. Migrants contact smugglers and make arrangements for their journey in different cities on different sides of the borders.<sup>6</sup> The jungle-like settings that separate Mexico from Central America provide a porous territory that can be crossed on foot, by boat or by motor vehicle. Once in the Mexican cities of Tapachula or Tenosique in Chiapas state or Chetumal in Quintana Roo, migrants continue their way northwards through Mexico overland, often via Mexico City.

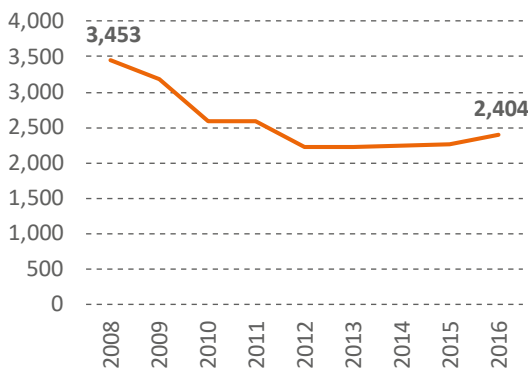
On the Mexican side of the United States - Mexico border there are multiple crossing points. The city of Tijuana – in Mexico's far north-western corner - has historically been a point of both regular and irregular crossings into the area around San Diego in California.<sup>7</sup> The area surrounding the city of Nogales in the Mexican state of Sonora (across the border from the identically named town in the state of Arizona in the United States) is known for the presence of rural communities occasionally providing support to the irregular border crossing.<sup>8</sup> The cities of Matamoros, Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas are also reported to be transit areas for smuggling organizations facilitating border crossings for Central and South American migrants into the United States.<sup>9</sup>

### The magnitude of migrant smuggling along the northward route

Migrant smuggling along the border between the United States and Mexico is an old phenomenon, and most migrants who attempted to cross this border irregularly hired smugglers as early as the 1970s. Survey data quoted in a study carried out for the US Office of Immigration Statistics in 2010 indicated that 95 per cent of first-time crossers used smugglers in 2006. Another survey quoted in the same study, covering the decade of the 2000s, showed that 80 to 93 per cent of irregular crossers used smugglers.<sup>10</sup>

One set of data that explicitly discusses migrant smuggling offenders is published by the United States Sentencing Commission, which compiles smuggling statistics for the determination of sentencing guidelines. In fiscal year 2016 (1 October 2015 – 30 September 2016), more than 2,400

**FIG. 35:** Trend in the number of sentenced migrant smuggling offenders, United States, 2008-2016\*



\* Fiscal years: FY 2016 ran from 1 October 2015-30 September 2016. Source: United States Sentencing Commission.

**TABLE 4:** Number of sentenced cases of migrant smuggling into the United States and number of persons smuggled per case, FY 2016

NUMBER OF SENTENCED CASES	REPORTED NUMBER OF SMUGGLED MIGRANTS PER CASE (RANGE)
1,244	1-5
958	6-24
135	25-99
65	100 or more

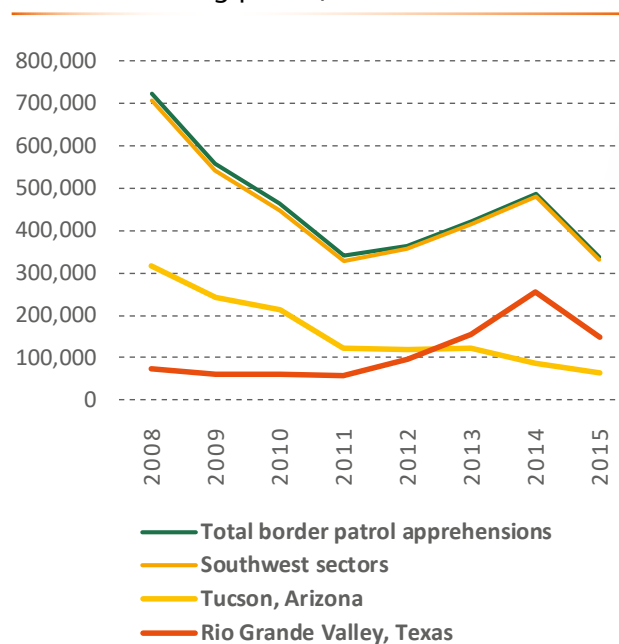
Source: United States Sentencing Commission.

migrant smuggling offenders<sup>d</sup> were sentenced, although the trend has declined since 2008. Most smuggling cases heard in court involved jurisdictions along the US-Mexico border. In fiscal year 2016, nearly half of the cases came from the Southern District of Texas alone, and 94 per cent of the cases were heard in courts in districts<sup>e</sup> situated along the border with Mexico.<sup>11</sup> When considering this data, it should be noted that sentenced offenders represent only a part of the total number of smugglers. Much smuggling goes undetected and many smugglers may also be charged with offences other than migrant smuggling.

The data also contain information about the number of migrants smuggled per case, published in relatively broad

d The offence is: 'Smuggling, transporting or harbouring an unlawful alien', with 'alien' referring to persons who are not citizens or nationals of the United States. See: <https://www.ussc.gov/research/quick-facts/alien-smuggling>.  
 e The top five court districts for sentencing migrant smugglers in FY 2016 were: Southern District of Texas (1,144 cases), Western District of Texas (432), District of Arizona (323), Southern District of California (273) and District of New Mexico (93).

**FIG. 36:** Trend in the number of apprehensions by the US Border Patrol: total, southwest sector and selected border crossing points, 2008-2015\*



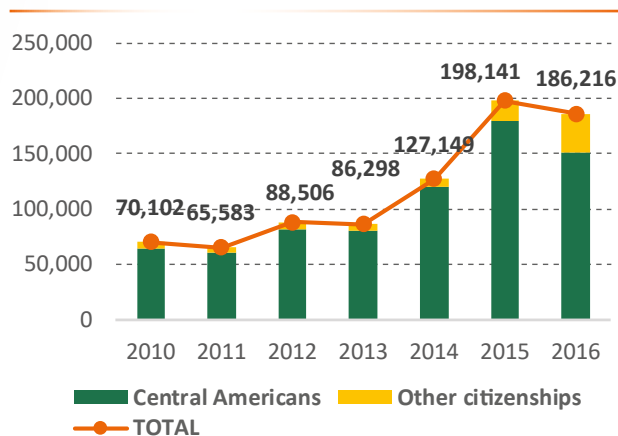
\* Fiscal years: FY 2015 ran from 1 October 2014-30 September 2015. Source: United States Department of Homeland Security.

ranges. Most of the cases involve a small number of smuggled migrants, although there are also some very large cases involving more than 100 migrants.

Another data set from the United States concerns irregular migrant apprehensions by the US Border Patrol. This data should be interpreted with caution as many migrants might be apprehended for reasons unrelated to migrant smuggling, and it is unknown how many of the apprehended migrants had been smuggled. The 2010s has seen an overall decline in the number of apprehensions at US borders, as well as a shift in the location of border crossings. Nowadays, most of the border crossings occur in Texas, and not in Arizona, which was the case a decade or so ago.

The authorities of Mexico also publish data on migrant detections. The number of detections by Mexican authorities has increased rapidly in recent years. The growth has been largely driven by enhanced enforcement and larger numbers of Central American migrants. The trend might be changing, however. In 2016, the number of Central Americans decreased, and at the same time, the number of detected migrants from Caribbean countries increased, in particular due to citizens of Haiti. More than 17,000 Haitian migrants were detected in Mexico in 2016 (up from fewer than 30 in 2013).

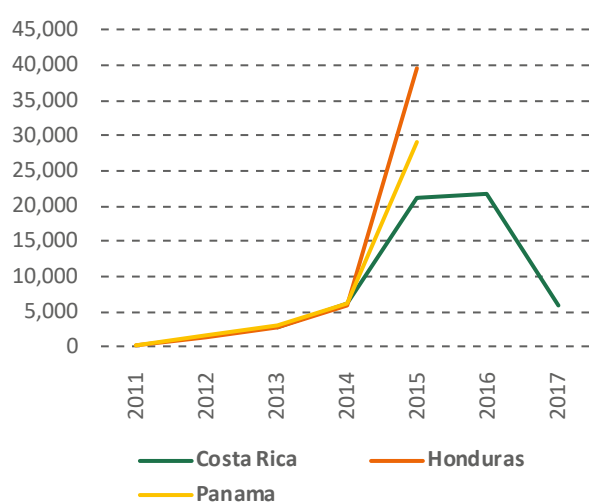
**FIG. 37: Number of migrant detections by Mexico, 2010-2016**



Source: Ministry of Interior, Mexico.

The growing risks connected to irregular crossings have also led many migrants traveling along the northward route to give up their hope of reaching the United States. Some instead settle in Mexico, where they have filed asylum claims in record numbers. Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicate that from 2013 to 2016, yearly asylum applications in Mexico increased from 1,296 to 8,732. According to statistics from the Mexican government, by August 2017, the number of applications for asylum had almost surpassed those received in all of 2016.<sup>12</sup>

**FIG. 38: Trend in the number of entries of irregular migrants, selected Central American countries, 2011-2017**



Source for Panama and Honduras: Organization of American States/IOM (citing national authorities in the countries concerned), *Irregular Migration flows within the Americas from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean*, 2016.

Source for Costa Rica: Direccion General de Migracion y Extranjeria.

Some Central American countries also collect data on irregular entries. This data do not necessarily include migrant smuggling activity, but can nonetheless give an indication of the magnitude of flows through these countries. There was a surge in the number of irregular entries in 2015; whereas for 2017, figures from Costa Rica suggest a reduction in such entries.

### The profile of smuggled migrants

Migrants from many locations across the Americas use the northward route to reach North America, and in particular, the United States. While Mexicans and Central Americans comprise the vast majority, they are also joined by some smuggled migrants from countries in South America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

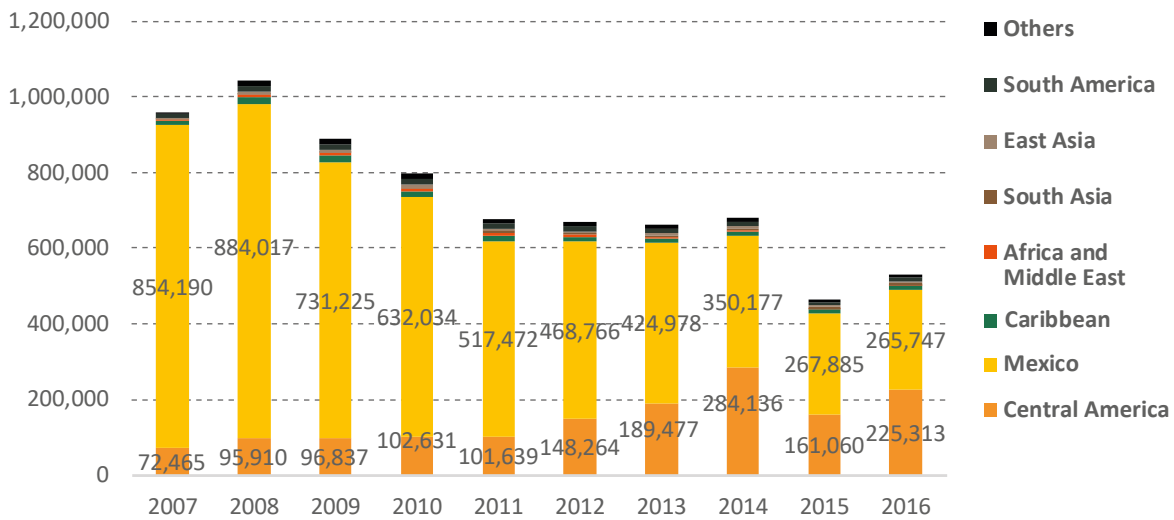
Data from the United States Department of Homeland Security<sup>13</sup> show that apprehensions by the Border Patrol take place almost exclusively along the land border between the United States and Mexico, where, as previously mentioned, the vast majority of migrants make use of smugglers. United States data on immigration enforcement actions confirm the decreasing trend of Mexicans crossing the borders irregularly, while the shares of Central Americans have increased.

Based on data from Mexico<sup>14</sup> it appears that in 2015, Mexico detected more Central American migrants than the United States. While the numbers of detections in Mexico increased until 2016, the citizenship profiles have remained broadly stable, with Guatemalans comprising the largest group, followed by Hondurans and Salvadorans. Among the detected migrants from the Caribbean, in 2016, most were citizens of Haiti.

Some Central American countries also collect statistics regarding the citizenships of irregular migrants detected upon entry into their territories. There is, however, no indication of how many of these irregular entries involved migrant smuggling. Overall, the data shows a peak in detections of citizens from the Caribbean in 2015, with numbers declining sharply in 2016. Moreover, it appears that few Haitians are transiting Central American countries. The number of detected Haitians who have irregularly entered Central American countries is far lower than in the United States and Mexico, and although Honduras detected nearly 2,300 Haitians in the first eight months of 2016, none of the other Central American countries reporting data saw similar significant increases.

The countries that reported the most notable increase in the detections of irregular entries by citizens of African countries were Honduras and Costa Rica. In 2014, 348

**FIG. 39:** Trend in the number of foreigners apprehended in immigration enforcement actions in the United States, total and by area of origin, 2007-2016\*

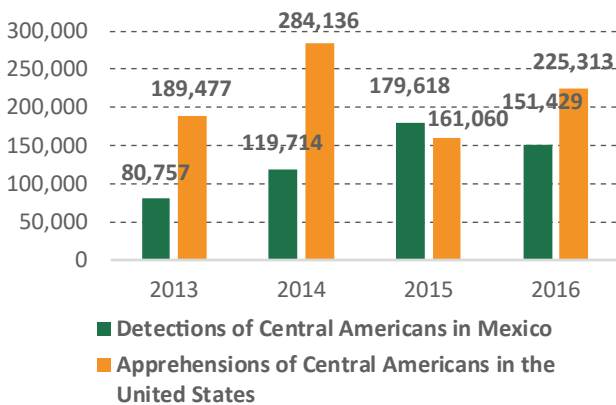


\* Fiscal years.

Source: US Department of Homeland Security.

Africans entered Honduras irregularly, compared to 20,691 in 2015. Costa Rica recorded 18,000 irregular entries by African citizens in 2016. The data source notes that increases in irregular entries by Africans across several countries in 2016 involved many citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as the Congo.<sup>15</sup> Other principal African countries of origin for irregular entries in Central America in recent years are Somalia, Ghana, Senegal, Cameroon and Guinea. For Asians, the most frequently reported origin countries appear to be Nepal, Bangladesh and India.<sup>16</sup>

**FIG. 40:** Number of detections of Central Americans in Mexico and apprehensions of Central Americans in the United States\*, 2013-2016



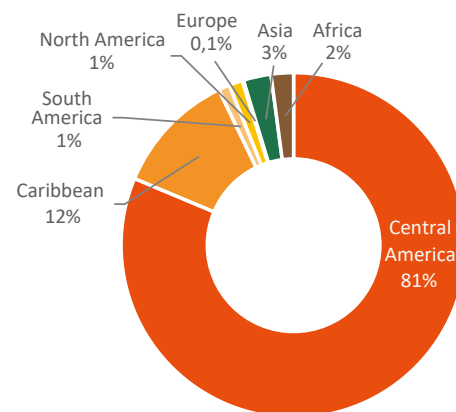
\* US data refers to fiscal years.

Source: US Department of Homeland Security; Mexico SEGOB.

Data from Costa Rica regarding entries of irregular migrants along the country's main southern land border shows that men comprise a clear majority, but the share of women has increased. In 2014, women comprised 21 per cent of all detected irregular migrants, whereas in the first seven months of 2016, the share was 26 per cent.<sup>17</sup> Surveys carried out at shelters across Mexico indicate that about three quarters of the migrants traveling along Mexico's migratory routes are male, and single, with 79 per cent aged from 18 to 40.<sup>18</sup>

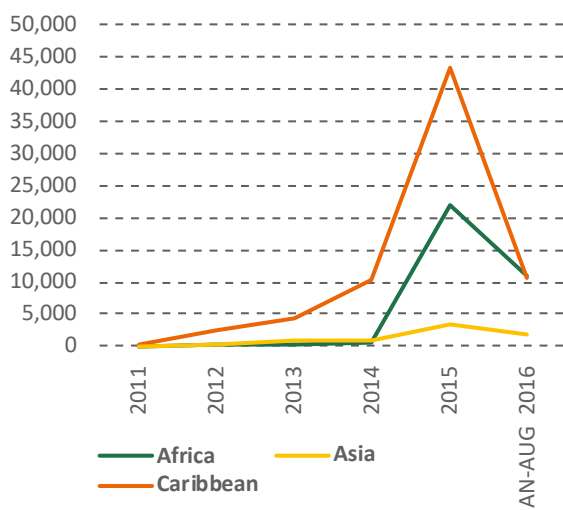
The presence of unaccompanied minors - citizens of all major origin countries considered in this route - has generated concern, although the trend seems to be decreasing.

**FIG. 41:** Detections of migrants in Mexico, by area of citizenship, 2016



Source: Mexico, SEGOB.

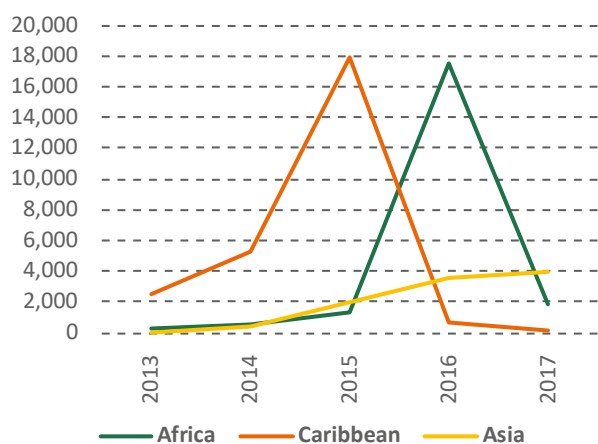
**FIG. 42:** Trend in the number of detected Caribbean, African and Asian irregular migrants in Honduras and Panama, 2011 – 2016\*



\* The 2016 data is preliminary, from January until August.

Source: Organization of American States/IOM (citing national authorities in the countries concerned), *Irregular Migration flows within the Americas from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean*, 2016.

**FIG. 43:** Trend in the number of detected Caribbean, African and Asian irregular migrants in Costa Rica, 2013 – 2017



Source: Direccion General de Migracion y Extranjeria of Costa Rica.

In fiscal year 2016, the United States Border Patrol apprehended 58,819 unaccompanied minors of different nationalities along border with Mexico. In fiscal year 2017, this decreased to 40,631.<sup>19</sup>

### The smugglers' profile and organization

Across the northward route, smugglers are commonly known as *coyotes* or *polleros*. While their organizational capabilities, methods, reliability and effectiveness vary widely, in general, smugglers – particularly along the

border between the United States and Mexico - act individually, yet in coordination with others. They perform specific tasks or provide certain services along migrants' routes for a fee or in kind payment.<sup>20</sup> Smuggling tasks are often highly specialized, with smugglers acquiring expertise in roles such as recruiters, drivers, lookouts or guides. The cooperation between different operators is often sufficient to offer not only 'a la carte' smuggling services along the migrant's route (specific legs of travel, border crossings, modes of transport, et cetera) but also entire migrant journeys from departure to final destination. For example, some migrants pay for a very short trip from one bank of the Rio Grande river to the other, while others pay for smuggling from their hometown to a final destination city in the northern United States.<sup>21</sup>

Most smugglers involved in complex operations are either known to each other by virtue of kinship or friendship, or have entered into ad hoc partnerships with larger and better resourced groups. Some are migrants or refugees themselves who have become involved in some aspect of smuggling either in the context of their own journey or because they reside along the migrant route.<sup>22</sup>

While most smugglers are men, women are also active, particularly in the provision of services such as caring for children and the elderly, preparing meals or cleaning safe houses. On both sides of the border between the United States and Mexico, some children and teenagers also participate in smuggling activities. Known in policy circles as "circuit minors," they often act as group guides or lookouts.<sup>23</sup>

The only country along this route to publish systematic statistics regarding migrant smugglers is the United States.<sup>24</sup> In fiscal year 2016, nearly two thirds (65 per cent) of the 2,404 sentenced smugglers were United States citizens. Their average age at the time of sentencing was 32, and more than half (56 per cent) had little or no prior criminal history. More than three quarters (76 per cent) of the smuggling offenders were male.

The idea that smuggling on the northward route is under the control of drug trafficking organizations in Mexico has been rejected by many experts.<sup>25</sup> However, some have argued that there is a nexus between drug trafficking and migrant smuggling.<sup>26</sup>

Interactions certainly take place as a result of the nature of these trades and the role of the border in their completion. The payment of *derecho de piso* by migrant smugglers - a 'tax' to use routes under the control of drug trafficking organizations - has been documented.<sup>27</sup> Failing to pay the

*derecho de piso* may result in segregation, torture and killing of migrants. Some of these organizations have been involved in mass executions of hundreds of migrants caught travelling along the northern route.<sup>28</sup>

Cases like the massacre in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, where the remains of 72 migrants from Central, South America and Asia were identified,<sup>29</sup> and the ensuing finding of mass graves containing what are believed to be the remains of hundreds of migrants in different parts along the northward route, are reportedly connected with the presence of these larger organized crime groups.

However, the payment of *derecho de piso* does not seem to constitute evidence of structural dependency among organizations. Some authors argue that considering it an example of convergence masks the complexity of the actors involved.<sup>30</sup>

### The smugglers' modus operandi and the travel arrangements

Most smuggled migrants along this route come from Central America or Mexico. As a result, most of the travel involves crossing several Central American countries, plus traversing all of Mexico, before reaching the United States border. Along this route most smuggled migrants travel by land, while some may cover segments of their journeys by air. There is also evidence that on occasion, some migrants rely on sea routes connecting ports in South and Central America with Mexico and the United States.<sup>31</sup>

Central American smugglers who operate along the northward route often travel from and work in the different large cities of Central America, where they recruit migrants and organize the transport to locations on the Guatemalan side of the border with Mexico. Close to the border with Mexico, most migrants rely on smuggler 'guides' who walk them across short distances to evade controls.<sup>32</sup> According to UNODC research from 2012, smuggled migrants may even make use of zip lines across two rivers along the border between Guatemala and Mexico; the Usumacinta and the Suchiate.<sup>33</sup>

Once in Mexico, migrants often hire smugglers who guide them in their further travels. Others, traveling on their own or with limited resources, opt to stay away from traditional routes fearing encounters with law enforcement and criminal entities.<sup>34</sup> Most smuggled migrants then make their way to Mexico City, from where they split into three broad routes, depending on their intended point of entry into the United States. The first is the Gulf route, for those wanting to cross through the Rio Grande Valley and other points in eastern Texas. This appears to be the most common route nowadays. The second is the Pacific

route, for those seeking to cross into Arizona or California, and finally, the Central route for those crossing into western Texas or New Mexico.<sup>35</sup>

In the United States, there have been geographical shifts in the locations of key smuggling hubs and markets. In the 1990s, the implementation of special enforcement measures by the US Border Patrol<sup>f</sup> funnelled the flow of border crossings from the states of Texas and California into the state of Arizona, which recorded the highest numbers of migrant crossings and deaths during the decade of the 2000s.<sup>36</sup> Enforcement, the changing economic conditions of the United States and Mexico and the demographic changes in the makeup of US-bound smuggled migrants (more Central Americans for whom Texas is closer than Arizona or California) have led migrant flows to shift further east into south Texas in the 2010s.

In the state of Texas in the United States, small towns scattered along the border close to cities like Laredo, Brownsville and McAllen serve as transit after the border crossing. Migrants are often housed in these towns until the conditions for their transportation to locations within the United States are considered optimal by smugglers.<sup>37</sup>

As for most routes, smugglers establish their fees on the basis of multiple variables, ranging from enforcement levels<sup>38</sup> to points of departure and destination, the route and means of transportation selected, and even their personal connection to the migrants they transport.<sup>39</sup> Some research indicates that women are charged higher prices than men, and that age can play a role in determining the price.<sup>40</sup> Some smugglers also offer special, more expensive 'packages' to migrants that include a specific number of border crossing attempts that take into consideration the likelihood of arrest.<sup>41</sup> The terms of payment are nearly always the subject of intense negotiations.<sup>42</sup> A 2016 report cited a price range of US\$6,000-8,000 for being smuggled from northern Mexico into the United States.<sup>43</sup> According to field studies conducted among migrants returned to their origin countries, in recent years, Mexican migrants may have paid around US\$5,000 to be smuggled to the United States,<sup>44</sup> whereas Central American migrants may have paid on average US\$7,000 to be smuggled across Mexico and finally to the United States.<sup>45</sup>

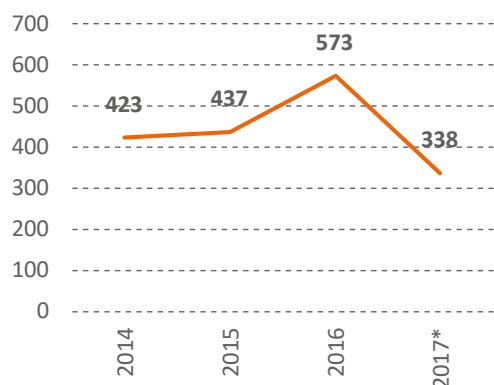
<sup>f</sup> In 1993, Operation Hold the Line in west Texas placed immigration agents right on the territorial border, which led to reductions in the number of crossing attempts in the El Paso Border Patrol sector. In 1994, Operation Gatekeeper temporarily sealed the stretch of the border between the Pacific Ocean and the San Ysidro port of entry, with the intention of pushing border crossing attempts eastward (Nevins, 2010). The impact of the shift was visible, for example, in the increasing migrant apprehensions along the Tucson sector of the Border Patrol, and in the number of migrant deaths recorded in Arizona since the late 1990s.



### The human cost

The northward route poses a number of risks for smuggled migrants. The number of fatalities is high, according to data from the IOM Missing Migrants Project. The reported figures for Central America and United States – Mexico border are minimum figures, not only because of the general risk of underreporting of migrant deaths, but also because deaths relevant to this route could be reported under Caribbean or South America in the IOM data set. 2016 appears to have been a year with particularly high numbers of fatalities; the data for 2017 up to 11 October indicate a declining trend.

**FIG. 44: Trend in the number of reported deaths along the northward route, \*\* 2014-11 October 2017**



\* 2017 data covers 1 Jan-11 Oct only.

\*\* Deaths reported to have occurred in Central America or on the United States-Mexico border. Does not include numbers of missing persons.

Source: IOM, Missing Migrants Project.

Environmental exposure –often a consequence of migrants’ attempts to avoid detection, arrest, or violence –continues to be the leading cause of death among those transiting in this route.<sup>46</sup> Cases of smugglers transporting migrants in the back of commercial trucks or lorries have also been documented, sometimes with fatal consequences, such as in July 2017, when 10 migrants were found dead from heat exposure and asphyxiation in the back of a tractor-trailer in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>47</sup>

While crossing the border with smugglers constitutes an attempt on the part of migrants to increase the chances for a successful journey, this is an inherently precarious activity. While traveling along the northward route, migrants often report that smugglers fail to deliver on their promises, abandon them along the way, steal their fees, turn them over to the authorities or abuse them verbally and/or physically.<sup>48</sup> Smuggled migrants may also

encounter anti-immigrant militias, robbers, law enforcement or members of criminal groups who assault them, rob them or engage in intimidation.

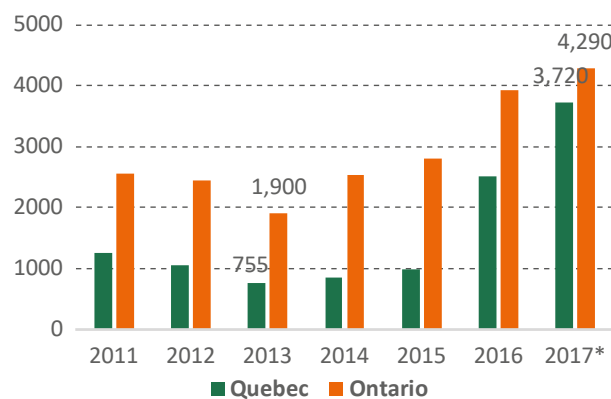
A troubling form of victimization of migrants smuggled along the northward route is the high incidence of extortion and kidnapping. As early as 2011, Mexico’s National Commission for Human Rights reported that at least 198 cases involving nearly 10,000 kidnapped migrants took place between September 2008 and February 2009,<sup>49</sup> whereas in 2016, the Commission reported that there were some 3,800 cases involving nearly 4,800 victims.<sup>50</sup> This criminal practice has primarily targeted migrants from Central and South America traveling along this route, although kidnapping incidents involving migrants have been reported throughout the country.<sup>51</sup>

### Other northward migrant smuggling routes: Canada

Although migrant smuggling into Canada occurs on a smaller scale than that taking place in the United States, the country has a significant history of smuggling incidents, particularly by sea. For decades, migrants from Asia arrived in Canada on board lifeboats, freighters, cargo and cruise ships. One large event took place in August 2010, when nearly 500 Sri Lankans were smuggled to Canada aboard the MV Sun Sea.<sup>52</sup> However, data from the Canada Border Services Agency shows that most of the people arriving into the country nowadays do so by land or air.<sup>53</sup>

Specific numbers concerning smuggling into Canada are not available. The Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario – which share borders with several large states in the midwest and northeastern regions of the United States

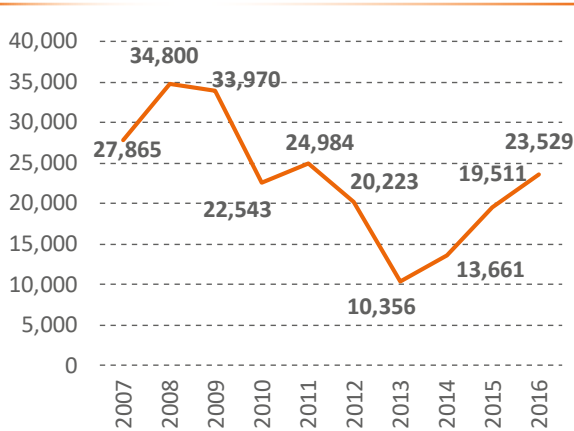
**FIG. 45: Number of asylum claimants processed by Canada Border Services Agency offices at Ontario and Quebec land ports of entry, 2011-2017\***



\* 2017 data up to September 2017

Source: Canada Border Services Agency.

FIG. 46: Trend in the number of asylum applications in Canada, 2007-2016



Source: UNHCR.

– report the largest number of land arrivals registered in connection with processed claims for asylum. The numbers of processed asylum claims emanating from overland border crossings is increasing, with most of the growth due to numbers from Quebec and Ontario land ports of entry.<sup>54</sup> It is not known how many of the border crossings were facilitated by smugglers.

As for the northward route, Canadian smugglers are organized in multiple ways. Smuggling operations may be carried out by migrant and refugee communities in Canada, organized crews operating locally or local residents operating independently.

Migrant smuggling in Canada may pose serious challenges to migrants' safety. The country's cold climate, in particular, may involve significant risk for those who are accustomed to warmer conditions and often lack appropriate equipment.

## THE SOUTHWARD ROUTE: MIGRANT SMUGGLING INTO AND THROUGH SOUTH AMERICA

### The main smuggling hubs, departure and arrival points

The trajectories of Caribbean, Central American and extra-continental migrants into South America constitute what in this report is designated as the southward route. Within South America, the MERCOSUR regional integration arrangement has eliminated visa requirements for citizens of most countries, which obliterates the need for migrant smuggling of most South Americans.<sup>g</sup> Most of

<sup>g</sup> As of November 2017, the participating countries are Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. MERCOSUR, *Residir y Trabajar en el MERCOSUR*, available at: <http://www.mercosur.int/innovapor->

the migrants smuggled into and through South America appear to be citizens of countries in the Caribbean. Some migrants are also smuggled from other continents, in particular, Africa and Asia.<sup>55</sup>

South American countries are sometimes destinations but perhaps more often transit areas for smuggled migrants heading northwards. While it is clear that some countries are more frequently traversed than others, due to, inter alia, geography, infrastructure, visa policies or a combination of these, it is difficult to single out specific routes. The information available regarding where and when migrants rely on smugglers is very limited.

Migrants from Cuba transit some parts of South America on their journeys northward to the United States.<sup>h</sup> One main route begins with a flight to Ecuador or Guyana. From there, migrants travel overland to Colombia, from where they board boats to Panama.<sup>56</sup> It is not clear how much of this travel is facilitated by smugglers.

Among Haitians, Brazil is a popular destination country. To reach Brazil, Haitians without a visa typically leave the capital Port-au-Prince by bus, traveling to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Once there, they purchase a flight ticket to Panama, and continue from there on by plane or bus to Quito, Ecuador. From there, they travel through Peru to reach Iñapari on the border with Brazil, where they cross the border.<sup>57</sup> Some sources noted that smuggling of Haitians along land routes transiting Ecuador and Peru intensified around 2014, and that new routes via the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Argentina also started to be used for this smuggling.<sup>58</sup>

The Chilean authorities have noted that more citizens of the Dominican Republic are arriving irregularly in Chile. Those that are smuggled would usually travel first to Ecuador or Colombia, and from there, towards the northern parts of Chile overland through the Plurinational State of Bolivia or Peru. The number of deportations of Dominican citizens due to clandestine entry

<sup>h</sup> [tal/v/6425/4/innova.front/residir-y-trabajar-en-el-mercotur](http://tal/v/6425/4/innova.front/residir-y-trabajar-en-el-mercotur).

<sup>h</sup> Official statistics provided by the Cuban authorities report an increasing intensity of legal travel from and to Cuba over the last five years (2013-2018). During this period, more than 800,000 Cubans travelled legally abroad, most of them for the first time. 11 per cent of them established their residence abroad. In 2017, national authorities reported a 39 per cent increase in the number of travels from Cuba to the rest of the world. During the same year, about 460,000 Cuban citizens travelled to the United States; not all of them with the intention to migrate. More than 2 million Cubans residing abroad traveled to Cuba over the last five years. In 2017, a 21 per cent increase of such travel compared to the previous year was reported. These numbers show an increasing legal mobility out of and into Cuba; only a part of it for migration purposes.

increased significantly in Chile in 2015, but is still relatively low, at nearly 600.<sup>59</sup>

Undocumented Asian and African migrants who aspire to reach North America may rely on countries in Central and South America as transit points. Many of them complete often intricate routes, either on their own or with the assistance of smugglers. To reach the Americas, most migrants fly from Europe or Southern Africa, and arrive mainly in Brazil or Ecuador, sometimes transiting African, Middle Eastern or Eastern European countries. The use of false or altered travel documents in order to board flights has been reported.<sup>60</sup>

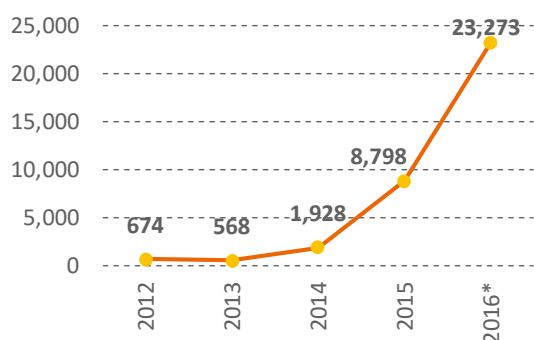
### The magnitude of migrant smuggling along the southward route

There is very little data concerning migrant smuggling into and within South America. Official statistics from some national authorities show, however, that irregular mixed migration flows<sup>61</sup> from Africa and Asia have been increasing in the last few years. The same is reported for irregular migration flows from the Caribbean.<sup>62</sup>

Data from the Colombian Sub-Division for Migrant Verification of Migration Colombia Unit shows a substantial increase in the number of detected entries of irregular migrants in Colombia from 2013 to 2016. It is not clear, however, how many of these entries were facilitated by migrant smugglers.

According to a study by the Brazilian Ministry of Justice, authorities in border areas recognize that irregular migration takes place although there remains a lack of precise statistics.<sup>63</sup> The study notes the presence of Caribbean, African and Asian migrants in border areas. It is unknown

FIG. 47: Trend in the number of detected entries of irregular migrants in Colombia, 2012-2016\*



\* 2016 data only covers the period from January to August.

Source: OAS/IOM 2016 (citing data from national authorities).

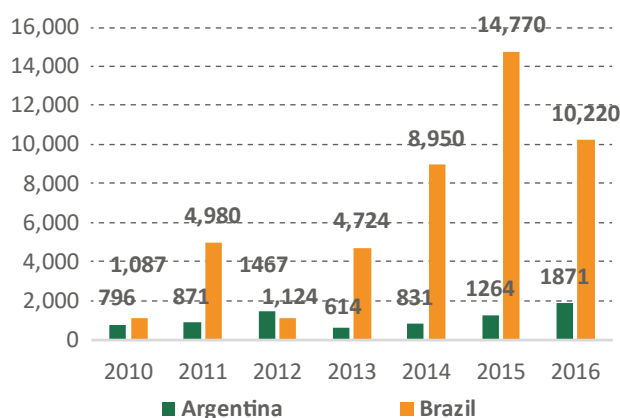
how many of these migrants have been smuggled. A reported episode involved some South Asians who had been smuggled into Brazil at the border town of Guará, on the border with Paraguay. There had also been some cases of Haitians who had crossed the border with the assistance of 'coyotes'.<sup>64</sup> A recent study on migration from Haiti cites an estimate of 47,000 Haitians having entered Brazil irregularly between 2011 and 2015.<sup>65</sup>

Argentina has a high level of immigration.<sup>66</sup> It is also believed to be a significant destination for irregular migration, although this is difficult to demonstrate quantitatively. The number of asylum seekers in Argentina has increased moderately in recent years, although increases in Brazil have been larger. As for any statistics on asylum seekers, it is unclear how many of the applicants made use of smugglers to reach the country of application.

### The profile of smuggled migrants

While intra-regional migration has long been seen as uncontroversial as a result of MERCOSUR's agreements, the topic of extra-regional migratory flows has received

FIG. 48: Trend in the numbers of applications for asylum lodged in Brazil and Argentina, 2010-2016

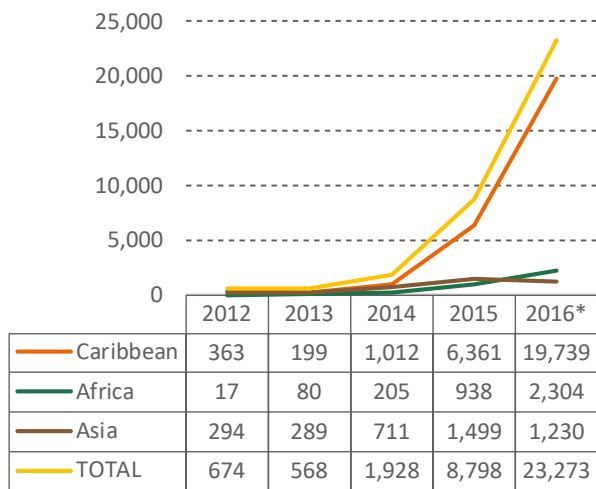


Source: UNHCR.

increased attention in recent years. For example, the Organization of American States has noted that irregular mixed migration flows in the Americas have been growing since 2010, and that there is vast ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity among those who comprise these flows.<sup>67</sup>

Data on irregular entries in Colombia illustrates that the flows are comprised mainly of people from the Caribbean. In 2016, the number of Haitian irregular entries detected in Colombia skyrocketed to nearly 15,000, from only 35

FIG. 49: Trend in the number of detected entries of irregular migrants in Colombia, total and by region of origin, 2012-2016\*



\* 2016 data only covers January-August.

Source: OAS and IOM, 2016 (citing data from national authorities).

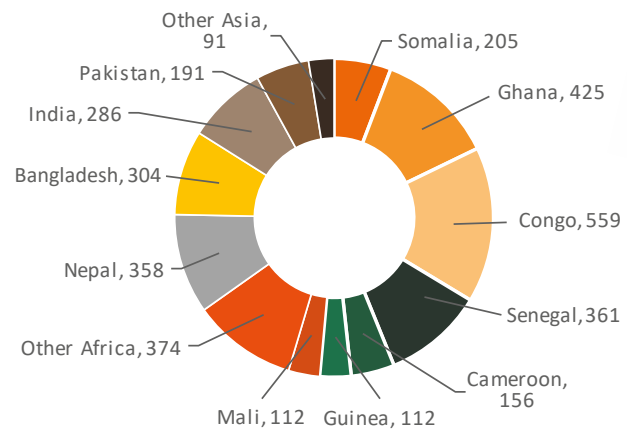
the year before. The number of irregular entries by Cubans was more than 6,000 in 2015 and nearly 5,000 during the first eight months of 2016. The number of detected irregular migrants from African and Asian countries remained relatively low, but the number of Africans surpassed that of Asians in 2016.

The Colombian data also show that there is great geographical diversity among the detected irregular migrants from outside the Americas. In the first eight months of 2016, large numbers of citizens of seven African and four Asian countries (more than 100 from each of these countries) were detected while irregularly entering Colombia. While these movements may not necessarily have involved migrant smuggling, given the large distances, it is likely that many did, at least during some part of the journey.

According to a 2013 study, between 2006-2012 in Colombia, East Asian citizens comprised the largest group of detected smuggled migrants by some distance (more than 38 per cent).<sup>68</sup> However, the more recent data on irregular entries reported above showed a marked decline among East Asian citizens in the first eight months of 2016. Although the two data sets are not directly comparable – one refers specifically to migrant smuggling, and the other to irregular entries - it does appear that the smuggling of East Asian citizens into Colombia has declined in recent years.

Statistics on the origin of asylum seekers confirm that

FIG. 50: Shares of citizenships among detected African and Asian irregular migrants in Colombia, January-August 2016 (n=3,504)



Source: OAS and IOM, 2016 (citing data from national authorities).

people from many parts of the world seek protection in South America. In Brazil, in particular, the numbers and citizenship variety of asylum seekers have risen considerably in recent years.

### The smugglers' profile and organization

There is limited data regarding smugglers and how the smuggling is carried out along the southward route. Some sources indicate that smuggling involves ranging levels of complexity and organization, given the variety of destinations that migrants seek to reach. Others suggest that most movements are facilitated by local smugglers living in communities along the migrant trail who are well versed on the routes and mechanisms required for a successful journey. Men and women with whom migrants may share social or cultural ties may also be involved in the smuggling. Some smugglers may be particularly familiar with mechanisms conducive to irregular migration as a result of their own migration status.<sup>69</sup>

In South America, smugglers are known as *coyoteros* and *chilingueros*. Contrary to the case of the northward route, there are no clear indications that migrant smuggling has close links to drug trafficking. Ordinary men and women of varying ages and occupations are involved in the provision of smuggling services. The majority of those who provide services appear to be individuals working with the intention of generating supplemental income. Reports indicate that smugglers work as guides, connecting migrants with other smugglers at other locations, or transport them along segments of the route. Members of indigenous communities along the migrant trail have also been

identified as being engaged in smuggling, primarily in communities in Ecuador and Brazil.<sup>70</sup>

Smugglers and smuggled migrants often have the same citizenship; particularly when considering smugglers in senior ‘organizing’ roles. A court case from Chile is illustrative in this regard. In this case, a woman from the Dominican Republic was convicted for having led a network that smuggled more than 44 people, mostly Dominicans, to Chile. She managed a travel agency in the Dominican Republic, through which she recruited migrants and then smuggled them by air and overland to Chile, with numerous other smugglers facilitating different parts of the journey.<sup>71</sup> Despite this specific case, smugglers are typically males. Official data from the Dominican Republic indicate that among the 10 people convicted in this country for smuggling of migrants in 2017, nine were males. During the same year, 22 people were indicted for the same crime and they were all males.<sup>72</sup>

### The smugglers’ modus operandi and travel arrangements

As for other regions and routes, smugglers operating in South America make use of multiple operational methods. Some may sell or lease false or fraudulent documents including visas, passports, residence authorizations and identification cards. In 2011, individuals known as *tramitadores* were reported to be involved in the smuggling of Ecuadoreans to the United States, offering comprehensive services. They recruited migrants, made travel arrangements and obtained counterfeit visas or passports.<sup>73</sup> More recent research documents that smugglers operating in migrants’ places of origin, transporting migrants to specific destinations at the request of the latter’s families, or when approached by aspiring migrants by word of mouth.<sup>74</sup>

The use of forged documents has been reported in the region, particularly in Brazil. In 2012, the police detected a flow of Bangladeshis that entered Brazil from the Plurinational State of Bolivia, at the border town of Corumba in Brazil’s Mato Grosso do Sul state. The smuggled migrants reportedly obtained falsified documents in Bolivia with which they managed to enter Brazil. More than 20 people were detained in this case.<sup>75</sup>

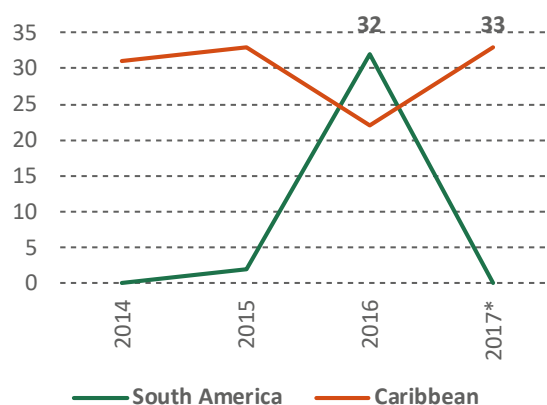
Smuggling services are financed in different ways. Some smugglers may be approached by people seeking to finance the journeys of their family members. Other trips may be financed through money lenders, who lend money at high interest rates and often demand the use of homes or land titles as collateral.<sup>76</sup> Little is known about smuggling

prices. One study reported that some South Asian smuggled migrants paid US\$3,500 to smugglers to cross the border between Paraguay and Brazil at Guaíra.<sup>77</sup> For Haitians, the price paid to smugglers for crossing Brazil from north to south - including the border crossing from Peru into the state of Acre or from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Colombia or Peru into the state of Amazonas - could amount to \$3,000.<sup>78</sup>

### The human cost

The number of migrant fatalities in the Caribbean and South America is lower than the figures reported along many other routes. The IOM Missing Migrants Project reported that until late October 2017, 33 migrants had perished in the Caribbean, and none in South America. These figures do not include missing persons, however.

FIG. 51: Trend in the number of migrant deaths reported in South America and the Caribbean, 2014-2017\*



\* Data coverage: 1 January – 23 October.

Source: IOM Missing Migrants Project.

As for other routes, migrant smuggling in South America often involves traveling under dangerous conditions. Venezuelan migrants attempting to reach countries like Colombia, Peru and Brazil or the islands of Curaçao or Bonaire may at times rely on boats piloted by fishermen not skilled in open-sea voyages, who may panic when fearing detection by the authorities and force their passengers to jump into the ocean despite being unable to swim.<sup>79</sup> The routes followed by Haitian migrants may take them through harsh and remote sections of the Amazon and the Andes. In general, the distance and conditions of clandestine migrations lead to significant levels of environmental exposure which may involve risks for the safety and wellbeing of people in transit.

It has also been reported that language barriers and the actions of organized smugglers may make some smuggled migrants more likely to encounter situations of labour exploitation. Moreover, smuggled migrants – particularly those not fluent in the local language, for example Haitians – might be tricked into paying large sums for false documents that are ultimately rejected by the authorities.<sup>80</sup>

## OTHER SMUGGLING ROUTES IN THE AMERICAS

The Caribbean island state of Trinidad and Tobago is widely viewed as a destination for both regional and extra-regional migrants, due to its relatively high level of development and available employment opportunities. It is also used as a transit point by some irregular migrants en route to Canada or the United States; some of whom stay and work for short periods to earn money for the rest of their journey.<sup>81</sup> Due to the country's small population of nearly 1.4 million,<sup>82</sup> the numbers of smuggled migrants are small in the global picture, but nonetheless illustrate the wide geographical extent of migrant smuggling.

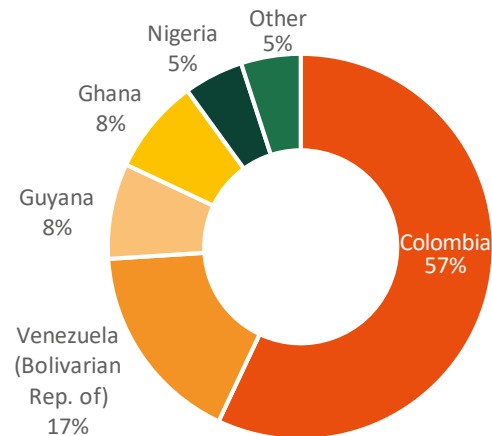
According to a 2013 study by the ACP Observatory on Migration,<sup>83</sup> most smuggling into the country relies on a combination of air and sea routes, and takes place along four main routes:

- Africa – Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) – Trinidad (by air and sea)
- Panama – Trinidad (by air)
- Colombia – Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) – Trinidad (by air and sea)
- West Africa – Brazil – Trinidad (by air)

In terms of citizenships of the smuggled migrants detected in Trinidad and Tobago between 2007 and April 2012, the majority were from Colombia. Citizens of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela also comprised a large share; perhaps due to the fact that the main island of Trinidad is located only 12 kilometres from the Venezuelan north coast. Most of the smuggled migrants were aged 20-34, with women comprising two thirds (66 per cent) of the total.<sup>84</sup>

Many of those interviewed for the 2013 study perceived close linkages between the smuggling of migrants and contraband such as firearms and narcotics. The study also noted that migrant smuggling fuels the market for fraudulent documents, particularly since new arrivals need documentation to access services and employment opportunities.<sup>85</sup>

FIG. 52: Smuggled migrants detected in Trinidad and Tobago, by citizenship, 2007-April 2012 (n=116)



Source: Waldropt-Bonair et al, 2013 (citing national authorities).

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