

Refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico: a focus on smuggling during the COVID-19 pandemic

This snapshot focuses on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the use of smugglers by refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico. It is based on 4Mi interviews with people on the move and a few key informant interviews in Guatemala City and Tapachula. It aims to contribute towards a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of refugees and migrants during the coronavirus pandemic.

Recommendations

- Closely monitor the impact of COVID-19 on smuggling, with a focus on protection risks.
- Engage with authorities to promote protection-sensitive immigration policies and border management during the pandemic.

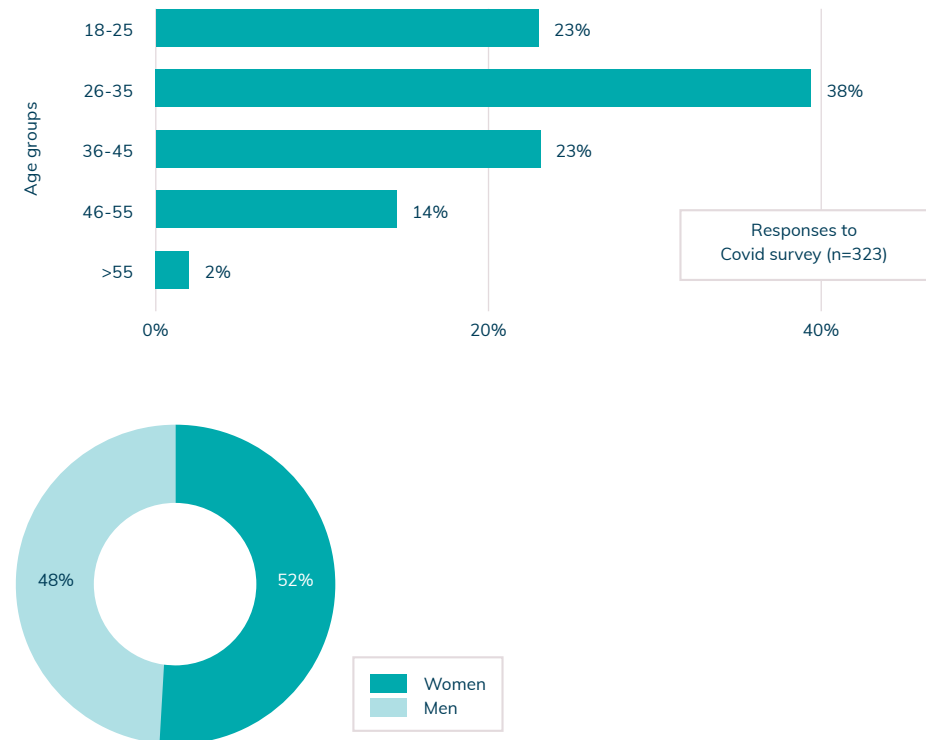
Profiles

This analysis is based on 323 surveys conducted between 13 July and 25 September 2020. Data collection was carried out remotely by phone.

43% of respondents were interviewed in Guatemala and 57% in Mexico. 88% of those surveyed in Guatemala were in the country's capital, Guatemala City, while 12% were in other cities such as Chimaltenango, Escuintla, Quetzaltenango, Sacatepéquez, among others. 90% of respondents in Mexico were in Tapachula (State of Chiapas) and the remaining 10% were in different cities including Tuxtla Gutierrez, Ciudad Hidalgo and Escuintla.

52% of all respondents were women and 48% were men. The average age of respondents was 34 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Age range and sex



Most respondents completed or temporarily suspended their migration journey before the pandemic began, meaning that they did not directly use smuggling services during the COVID-19 crisis. 61% of respondents arrived in the country of interview before the end of 2019 while, of those who arrived in 2020, 85% arrived before the pandemic hit the region in March.

According to 4Mi monitors' direct observation, once movement restrictions were imposed, many respondents decided to temporarily stop in the city of interview to work and earn some money to pay for the rest of the journey; others decided to apply for asylum or regularization options in the country where they temporarily stopped, due to the uncertain prospects regarding freedom of movement and immigration proceedings during the pandemic.

For these reasons, a considerable portion of respondents did not count with updated information concerning smuggling dynamics during the COVID-19 crisis.

The need for smugglers is greater

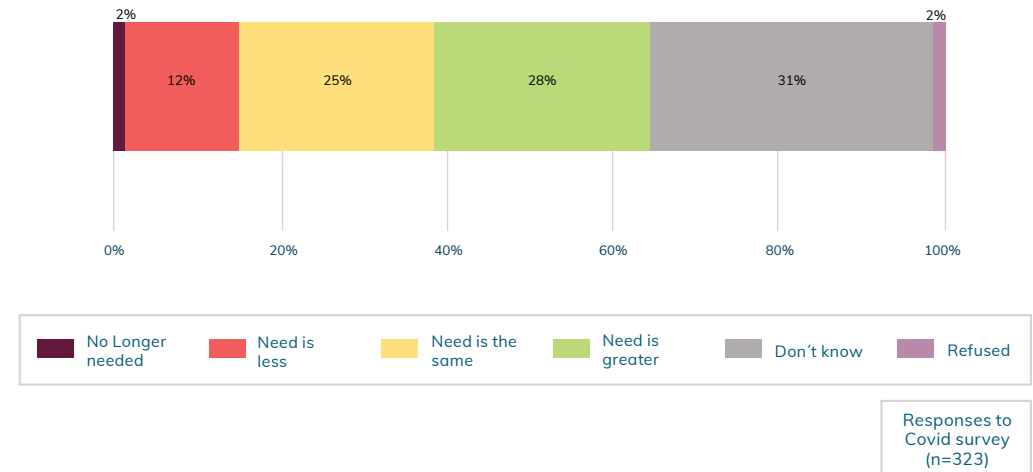
Many of the refugees and migrants trying to reach the U.S. from Central America rely on smugglers to facilitate their journey. [Smuggling services can vary](#) between an "all-inclusive package" (organizing all aspects of the journey from the country and place of origin until final destination) to interactions that are very limited in their reach, affecting only a part of the journey.

Since 2018, a new migration dynamic – the so-called "caravans" – had seemed to temporarily and partially [diminish the need for such services](#), as traveling in big groups helped refugees and migrants avoid risks and often pressured governments into allowing access to their territory. Such caravans however started facing a harsher response from the beginning of 2020.

Crossing borders generally became more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the border closures established to prevent the spread of the virus and the increased border controls. The U.S., in particular, [suspended all immigration proceedings](#) and implemented summary expulsion on public health grounds, effectively preventing most people on the move from entering its territory. Obstacles to migration in the region [deterred many from moving](#) during the pandemic and even convinced some to abandon their journeys and return home.

When asked whether the pandemic had any impact on the need to use smugglers to migrate, 28% of respondents said the need has increased, 25% said the need has remained the same, while 12% said the need for smugglers has decreased (see Figure 2 in the following page).

Figure 2. How has the need for using smugglers changed?



"The need to migrate and to use smugglers remains the same because no agency provides migration programs with opportunities for change, and if such programs exist, they are not accessible to everyone".

33-year-old Honduran woman in Guatemala City

"Despite the pandemic, migration has not stopped".

29-year-old Nicaraguan man in Chimaltenango, Guatemala

Around one third of respondents (31%) stated they do not know whether the need for smugglers has changed. Refugees and migrants surveyed in Mexico indicated more frequently not being aware of any changes in smuggling dynamics than respondents in Guatemala. One possible explanation is that 64% of respondents in Mexico arrived in the country before 2020, meaning that their most recent experience crossing borders was before the start of the pandemic.

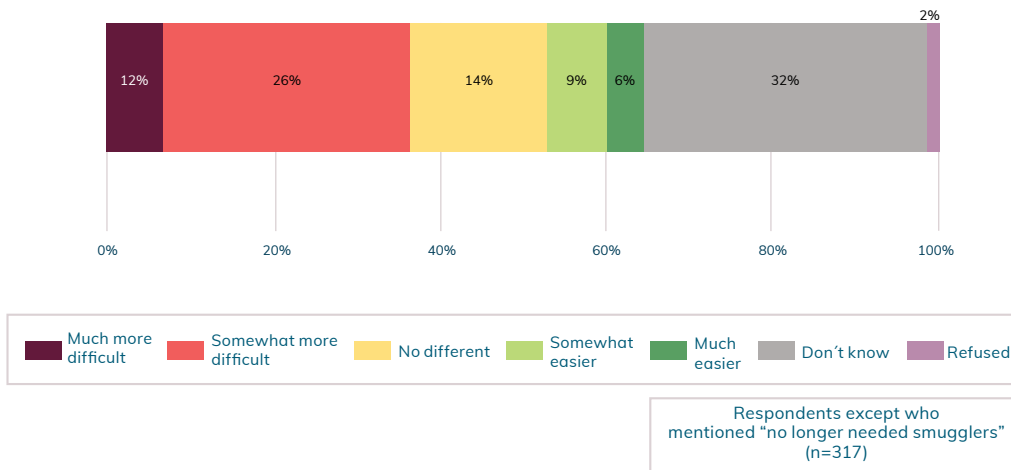
"I came last year, so I don't know how it works now".

50-year-old Guatemalan woman in Tapachula, Mexico

Access to smugglers is more difficult

38% of the refugees and migrants interviewed consider that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, access to smugglers has become more difficult. In contrast, 15% of respondents believe that access has been easier and 14% believe that there has been no change (see Figure 3). Once again, about one third of respondents stated not knowing how access to smugglers had changed.

Figure 3. How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted on access to smugglers?

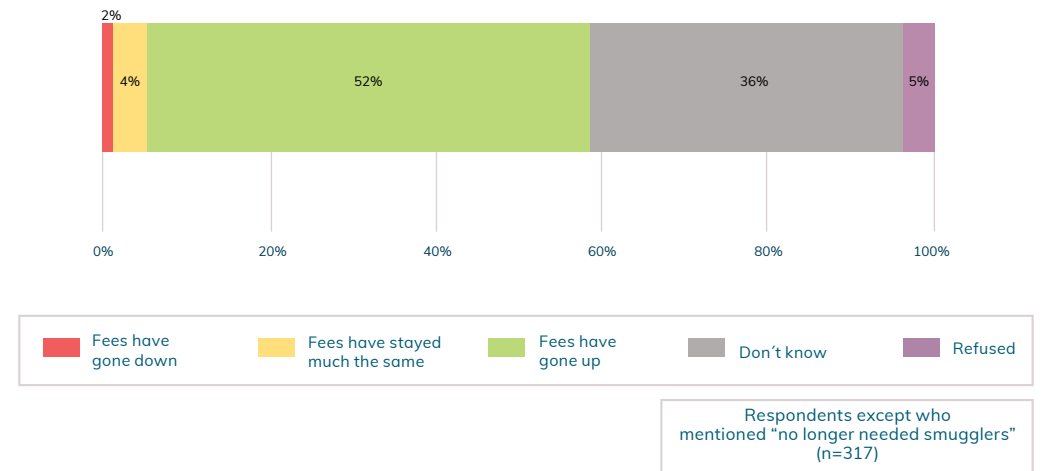


Higher fees and more dangerous routes

Most respondents (52%) reported that fees charged by smugglers have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, while only 4% noticed no change and 2% said that fees have gone down (see Figure 4). According to additional information shared by 4Mi monitors, this rise in cost is related to the increased difficulty in crossing borders and moving around inside countries since the pandemic began. This led the smugglers to start charging higher fees to people on the move.

Analysis disaggregated by country of interview shows that 59% of refugees and migrants interviewed in Guatemala believe the fees charged by smugglers have increased, while while the same opinion is held by 47% of respondents in Mexico.

Figure 4. Have smugglers' fees changed since before the COVID-19 crisis began?



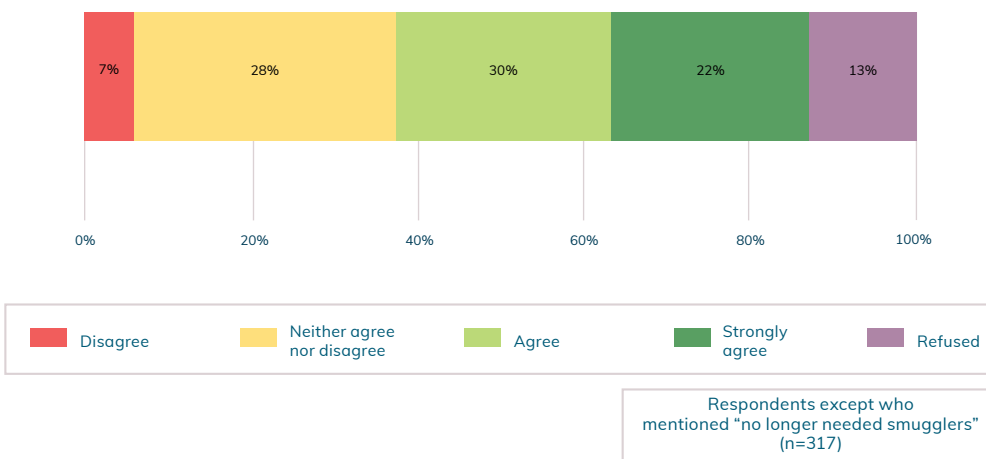
"With the excuse of the pandemic, they are requesting a lot of money for each favor, or every time we have to move to another place".

37-year-old Honduran man in Guatemala City

"They are using blind spots, mountains, horses and it is more expensive".

27-year-old Salvadorian woman in Guatemala City

Figure 5. Are smugglers using more dangerous routes since the COVID-19 crisis began?



“As they have closed routes, smugglers are looking for ways to continue and they are using harder and more dangerous routes”.

25-year-old Salvadorian man in Guatemala City

“Because of the difficult situation and with the need to earn something for our family, we take decisions regardless of the risks”.

51-year-old Salvadorian man in Guatemala City

In addition to an increase in fees, a majority of respondents (52%) also reported that smugglers have been using more dangerous routes during the pandemic, while 28% said they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, and only 7% disagreed (see Figure 5). 4Mi monitors reported that, according to respondents, smugglers had to adapt their strategies and look for more isolated smuggling routes, which are often longer and more impervious, to avoid the increased immigration controls established by some countries during the pandemic.



4Mi & COVID-19

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative](#) (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre’s flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

This document covers humanitarian aid activities implemented with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.