

## RESEARCH BRIEF

How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences  
are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border  
trafficking in persons to Europe and North America





**UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME  
Vienna**

**HOW COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS AND THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES  
ARE LIKELY TO IMPACT MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND CROSS-BORDER  
TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS TO EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA**

UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME (UNODC)  
RESEARCH BRIEF PREPARED BY THE RESEARCH AND TREND ANALYSIS BRANCH  
AND THE UNODC GLOBAL RESEARCH NETWORK

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## CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>5</b>
The COVID-19 crisis is likely to make smuggling of migrants riskier and more expensive for people fleeing persecution, violence and conflict. ....	5
Unemployment and economic downturn are likely to result in more cases of human trafficking .....	7
<b>THE SHORT TERM IMPACT - WHAT DOES THE MOST RECENT INFORMATION TELL US ABOUT THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS AND CROSS-BORDER TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS? .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Risks of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons to Europe.....	9
Risks of smuggling of migrants and human trafficking to North America .....	14
<b>THE MEDIUM-LONG TERM IMPACT - WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE IMPACT OF THE 2008 FINANCIAL CRISIS ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS AND SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS? .....</b>	<b>17</b>
The impact on Smuggling of Migrants to North America .....	17
...on Trafficking in Persons in North America.....	20
... on Smuggling of Migrants in Europe .....	21
... on Trafficking in Persons in Europe.....	23
<b>CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>ANNEX - METHODOLOGICAL NOTE.....</b>	<b>28</b>



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The unprecedented crisis that COVID-19 has suddenly unleashed upon the world is affecting all aspects of society and is likely to have an effect on the routes and characteristics of both regular and irregular migration. Smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons will also be affected in certain ways by the crisis. Many factors shape the dynamics of these two criminal phenomena, from the international political and security landscape to macro socio-economic dynamics and national law enforcement capacity - all of which have been affected by the global pandemic. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, and of the measures adopted by governments to contain it, differ across the globe, and the effects of these measures on smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons are likely to vary from country to country and from region to region.

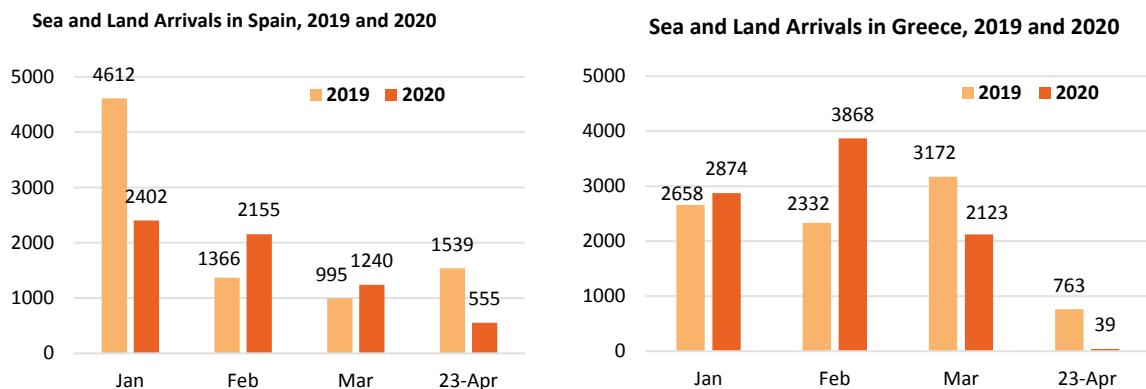
This Research Brief analyses possible scenarios of how smuggling of migrants and cross-border trafficking in persons are likely to be affected by the COVID-19 crisis along mixed migration routes to two important destination regions: North America and Europe.

One of the major consequences of the pandemic is the economic recession resulting from the lockdown measures governments have put in place to contain the diffusion of the virus. This paper draws on the dynamics observed during other global economic downturns, such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, to assess how the COVID-19-induced recession may affect smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons in the medium to long term. The research also reviews available information on current patterns during the COVID-19 lockdown measures and mobility restrictions, and on drivers of migration, as a way to assess possible fluctuations of trends in smuggling of migrants and cross-border trafficking in persons in the near future.

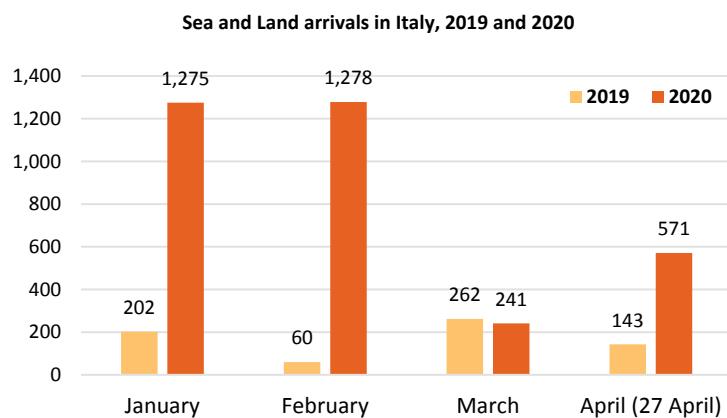
**The COVID-19 crisis is likely to make smuggling of migrants riskier and more expensive for people fleeing persecution, violence and conflict.**

COVID-19-related restrictions seem to have a different impact on smuggling of migrants who are fleeing conflict and persecution, as compared to other types of migratory movement. Migrant smuggling across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, for instance, is affected by conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Since the onset of the pandemic, no significant changes have been observed in the smuggling of migrants along the Western Mediterranean route from Morocco to Spain, when compared to the same period during 2019. A sharp decrease is visible in the use of the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece, though this is likely linked to migration management negotiations between Turkey and the European Union. On the other hand, a significant increase has been detected on the Central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy since the beginning of this year, in connection with the conflict situation in Libya.

**Figure 1: Recent trends in arrivals along the three Mediterranean Routes**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on IOM Flow Monitoring: <https://migration.iom.int/europe>, accessed 27.04.2020.



Source: UNODC elaboration based on Italian Ministry of Interior:  
[www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero), accessed 27.04.2020.

This suggests that COVID-19 travel and movement restrictions are not stopping the movement of people fleeing conflict, violence, and dangerous and inhumane conditions (as currently experienced by many refugees and migrants in Libya), who generally have no option but to use migrant smugglers. The closure of land, sea and air borders may increase smuggling of migrants, because people have an even greater need for the services of smugglers in order to cross borders. Closures and restrictions also often result in the use of more risky routes and conditions, and higher prices for smuggling services, exposing migrants and refugees to increased abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Smugglers may also benefit from a situation of increased demand by raising the prices of their services.

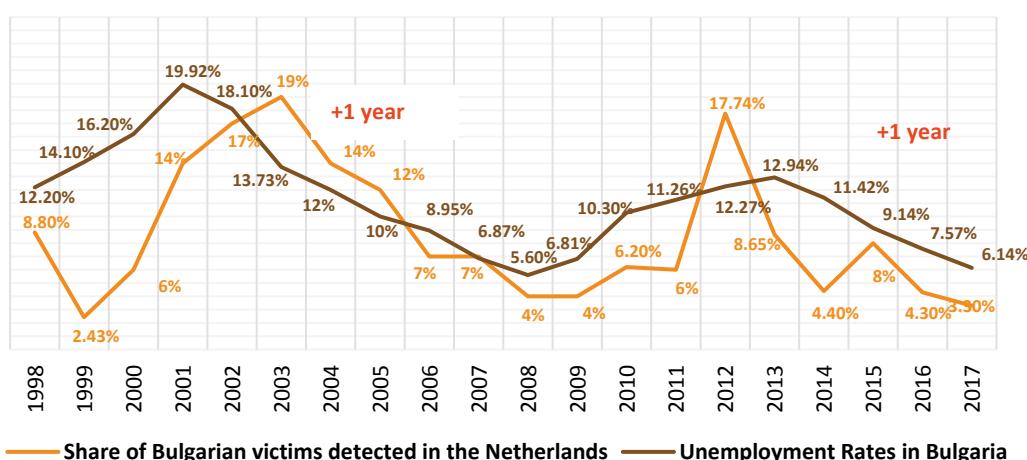
Although the data are not yet available, a similar context in terms of COVID-19 restrictions increasing vulnerabilities to abuse and trafficking may affect people fleeing high rates of violence in the “Northern Triangle” of Central America and fleeing the crisis in Venezuela. With fewer options for movement, desperation can lead to abuse, exploitation, trafficking and the need to use more costly and more risky smuggling services.

## Unemployment and economic downturn are likely to result in more cases of human trafficking

The combination of a global economic downturn and intensified migration restrictions creates a tension between increased interest among potential migrants in labor migration and limited options for regular migration. This may increase the demand for smuggling services and the risks of being trafficked. Incidents of deprivation of liberty for extortion, abuse, violence and trafficking affecting refugees and migrants stranded *en route* have been widely documented in many parts of the world in recent years and may increase as a result of the consequences the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic is forcing governments to shutdown their productive systems; processing plants, farms, factories and offices are closed to reduce the risks of COVID-19 diffusion among employees. This is resulting in a global recession and increasing levels of unemployment<sup>1</sup>. The sharp increase in unemployment rates resulting already seen in many parts of the world is likely to increase cross-border trafficking in persons from countries experiencing the fastest and longest-lasting drops in employment. This trend was observed during the Global Financial Crisis during 2007-2010, when trafficking victims from some countries particularly affected by prolonged high unemployment rates were increasingly detected in other parts of the world. As an example, the graph below shows the parallel trends of the unemployment rate in Bulgaria and the number of Bulgarian victims of trafficking in persons identified in the Netherlands. A similar pattern can be determined for Hungary during the years 1998-2016. On the other hand, during the years of the financial crisis and its aftermath in 2008-2013, countries like Czechia, for example, saw lower unemployment rates and the fallout lasted for a shorter period. No similar increases in the identification of Czech victims of trafficking were observed.

**Figure 2: Relationship between unemployment rates in Bulgaria and Bulgarians as a share of trafficking victims identified in the Netherlands<sup>2</sup> (1998 – 2016)**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on ILO Estimates (unemployment) and Dutch National Rapporteur (trafficking victims)

<sup>1</sup> IMF estimated a global economic growth in 2020 to fall to -3 per cent. This is a downgrade of 6.3 percentage points from January 2020, a major revision over a very short period. This makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression in 1929, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis at the end of last decade. See IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown (<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>)

<sup>2</sup> Linear Regression, Bulgarian victims of trafficking as dependent share of total victims detected in the Netherlands, and independent variable Bulgarian unemployment rate recorded one year before victim detection. Results: R-sq .716, Sig : .000, standardized coeff. for independent variable 0.846, sig. 0.000.

The widespread nature of this current economic crisis, together with increased control at borders due to COVID-19, are likely to reduce irregular migratory movement and related migrant smuggling in the short term. But in the medium to long term, an unequal economic recovery will increase labour migration, and without increased possibilities for regular migration this is likely to increase smuggling of migrants towards the countries that have a faster recovery.

The graph in figure 9 illustrates the example of irregular economic migration from Honduras to the United States during the 2008 financial crisis. While at the start of the crisis, irregular migration journeys from Honduras to the United States were relatively limited, it started to increase with the worsening of employment opportunities in Honduras following the crisis, peaking at more than 106,000 Hondurans apprehended for irregular entry at the US border in 2015. To make a comparison with El Salvador, a country that recovered from the crisis at faster pace compared to Honduras, a reduction in apprehensions of Salvadorians at the US border has been registered since 2014 (about 80,000 apprehensions in 2014; 42,000 in 2018).

The potential human rights impacts of COVID-19-related restrictions on travel, movement and economic activities – and of the consequent economic downturn – on smuggling of migrants and cross-border trafficking in persons may be severe, if they are not mitigated by investments in job creation and economic recovery across both developed and developing countries. The consequences in terms of increased crime, abuse, violence, exploitation and trafficking can be ameliorated by ensuring that providing avenues for regular migration journeys for refugees and migrants, and for regular immigration status in destination countries, is a key element of post-COVID-19 recovery plans.

## THE SHORT TERM IMPACT - WHAT DOES THE MOST RECENT INFORMATION TELL US ABOUT THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS AND CROSS-BORDER TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS?

Demand for smugglers' services arises when: people wish to or need to migrate for a variety of different reasons, including searching for better livelihoods, fleeing conflict and persecution, or reuniting with their families; it is not possible for them to migrate regularly due to travel and immigration restrictions; and border control and immigration control measures render it impossible to travel independently or reside irregularly in a country without assistance from intermediaries.<sup>3</sup>

Irregular migration journeys often create situations that make refugees and migrants vulnerable to trafficking in persons. It has been documented that traffickers recruit victims by inducing them to contract a debt to pay for a migration journey or recruitment fees, with the promise of a better life abroad. At destination, victims are exploited to pay back this debt, and traffickers take advantage of people's financial or security vulnerabilities.<sup>4</sup>

The intensification of measures to limit cross-border travel and immigration in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 will likely increase the demand for, and the difficulty of providing, smuggling services, making them more expensive and risky and thereby ultimately making more people vulnerable to human trafficking, as well as to other abuses.

### Risks of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons to Europe

Over the last 15 years, the three Mediterranean mixed migration routes (Western, Central and Eastern) from North Africa and Turkey to Europe fluctuated in terms of the numbers of people arriving. Due to the lack of alternatives for regular travel, the majority of these people were smuggled.<sup>5</sup> Conflicts and violence, and bilateral agreements between origin, transit and destination countries and regions, are among the factors influencing changes in the numbers of people arriving along the three routes.

During 2020, up to 26 April, a total of 19,827 people were recorded as arriving irregularly in EU countries by land or by sea along the three Mediterranean routes and 256 people were recorded as dead or missing during the Mediterranean crossing in 2020.<sup>6</sup> For comparison, throughout 2019, a total of 128,536 people were recorded as arriving in the EU irregularly, with a total of 1,885 people recorded as dead or missing.<sup>7</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the context of a steady decline in the numbers of people arriving irregularly in the EU on all routes, since the peak years of 2015/2016.

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<sup>3</sup> See: UNODC *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> See: UNODC *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014*, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> See: UNODC *Global Study of Smuggling of Migrants 2018*, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> IOM Flow Monitoring Europe: <https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals>, accessed 27.04.2020.

<sup>7</sup> IOM Flow Monitoring Europe: <https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals>, accessed 27.04.2020.

During the first four months of 2020, Greece has been the country where most people arrived irregularly. The next most important EU first country of arrival during this period was Spain, followed by Italy.

A significant proportion of people arriving along these routes are from countries of origin of many recognised refugees and beneficiaries of international protection in the EU, including Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, DRC, Somalia and Iraq. This means that many of those travelling from these countries - as well as some people from other countries, depending on their situation in the country of origin - are forced migrants who might be entitled to international protection.

**Table 1: Most common nationalities of people arriving along Mediterranean routes since January 2020**

Country of origin	Data date	Population	
Afghanistan	29 February 2020	25.60%	2396
Syrian Arab Rep.	31 March 2020	14.90%	1399
Others	32 March 2020	10.10%	942
Bangladesh	33 March 2020	7%	654
Sudan	34 March 2020	6.20%	579
Dem. Rep. of the Congo	29 February 2020	3.80%	359
Somalia	36 March 2020	3.70%	347
Côte d'Ivoire	37 March 2020	3.60%	338
Algeria	38 March 2020	3.50%	330
Iraq	39 March 2020	3.20%	298

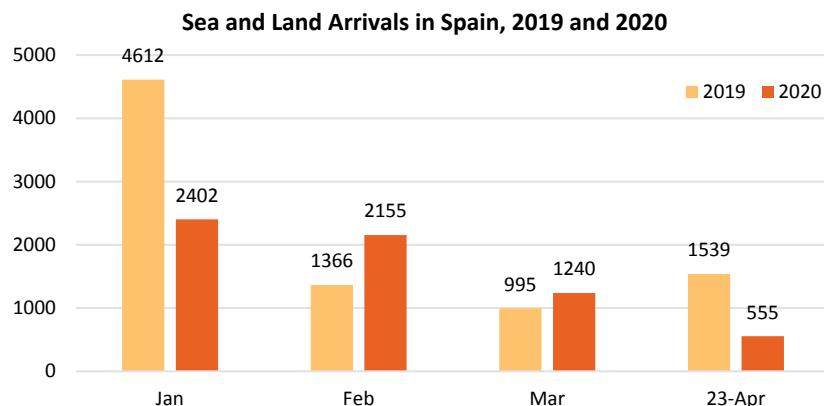
Source: UNHCR <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/583>, accessed 17.04.2020.

The Western Mediterranean route leads - for the majority of people travelling – from/through Morocco (principally in and around Tangier) across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea to Andalusia in Spain, and for a smaller proportion of people, overland from around Tangier in Morocco to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta or from around Nador in Morocco to the Spanish enclave of Melilla. Migrant smugglers provide sea crossings by boat as well as assistance in some cases for those attempting to cross the fortified land borders around Ceuta and Melilla. COVID-19-related restrictions at borders do not seem to be having a significant impact on smuggling operations along the Western Mediterranean route.

The first two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Morocco were identified in Casablanca on 2 March 2020. On 15 March, the Moroccan Government closed the country's land, sea and air borders, and the following day, all schools, universities and mosques were closed. The Government announced the "progressive confinement" of the population from 20 March 2020. Meanwhile, the Spanish Government imposed a State of Emergency and a national lockdown on 14 March, and closed its borders on 16 March, the day after its Moroccan counterpart. From 29 March, all non-essential workers were ordered to stay home.

Since the beginning of 2020, a total of 6,191 people have arrived in Spain irregularly from Morocco (as of 25 April). Looking at the situation month by month, compared to the same period last year, it seems that the crisis has neither had a significant effect in terms of disrupting smuggling operations, as arrivals continue, nor has it led to an increased demand for smuggling services.

**Figure 3: Number of people arriving in Spain along the Western Mediterranean route, comparisons by month 2019-2020**



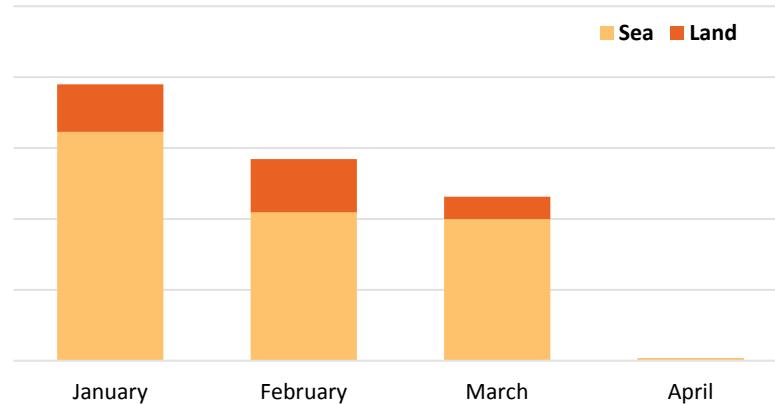
Source: UNODC elaboration based on IOM Flow Monitoring: <https://migration.iom.int/europe>, accessed 27.04.2020.

The situation is different for the Eastern Mediterranean route, where arrivals have decreased dramatically since early March 2020, with just 792 people recorded as arriving in Greece since 3 March 2020 (as of 16.04.2020), compared to 3,868 during the previous month (IOM data). This route is used by refugees and migrants to transit from Turkey to Greece, and, in much smaller numbers, to Cyprus and Bulgaria. The majority of people arriving on this route use migrant smuggling services to travel by sea from ports on the Western Turkish coast to nearby Greek islands or they cross the Evros River into Greece by land either independently or using smugglers. They then either remain - stranded or voluntarily - in Greece or travel onwards along the Western Balkan mixed migration route overland towards Western Europe.

The peak of arrivals along this route was in 2015 and the numbers have been in decline ever since (even if there was an increase from 56,879 people arriving in Greece in 2018 to 71,386 in 2019, these are fractions of the numbers of people arriving on this route in 2015 and 2016) (IOM data).

Since the beginning of 2020, a total of 9,641 people have arrived in Greece irregularly from Turkey (as of 19 April), with 7,569 using smugglers to travel by sea to the Greek islands in the North Aegean, and 2,072 people crossing overland in the Evros region.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 4: Number of people arriving in Greece by land and sea, January-April 2020**



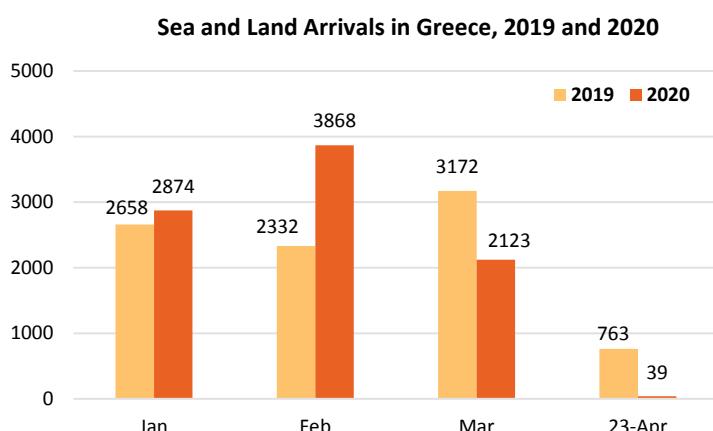
Source: IOM Flow Monitoring: <https://migration.iom.int/europe>, accessed 27.04.2020.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR Data: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>, accessed 27.04.2020.

During the period January to 15 April 2019, for comparison, a total of 8,925 people had arrived irregularly in Greece, so the numbers of people arriving this year have in fact remained remarkably stable. It is interesting to note, however, that irregular migration and smuggler-facilitated migration *overland* from Turkey to Greece seems to have ceased entirely in early March 2020.

Examining the situation month by month, a slightly different picture emerges. In January 2020, the numbers remained similar to January 2019, with a slight increase, while in February 2020, far more people arrived than in February 2019 – almost one and a half times as many. In March 2020, however, the numbers of people arriving were significantly lower than in March 2019, and in April 2020 (as of 16 April), just 39 people were recorded as arriving, compared to 763 people in April 2019.

**Figure 5: Number of people arriving in Greece, comparisons by month 2019-2020**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on IOM Flow Monitoring: <https://migration.iom.int/europe>, accessed 27.04.2020.

Due to the later onset of COVID-19 in Turkey, compared to Morocco and Libya, and the later and more gradual phasing in of restrictions, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on migrant smuggling along the Eastern Mediterranean route is particularly difficult to assess. Nevertheless, there has been a significant decrease in the number of people arriving during March and April 2020, compared to the same period last year, despite Turkey's temporary easing of restrictions on departing the country to Greece during March 2020. It is too early, however, to determine whether this is evidence of a COVID-19-related disruption of smuggling operations and/or a decreased demand for smuggling services, or whether it is due to other factors, such as migration-related negotiations between Turkey and the EU.

The Central Mediterranean route that leads from Libya and Tunisia to Italy has shown a significant increase in people arriving since the beginning of this year, compared to the same period last year. The Central Mediterranean route leads – for the majority of people travelling - from Libya, or to a lesser extent, Tunisia, to Italy. Migrant smugglers provide passage across the Mediterranean Sea to Italian ports on Sicily (Pozzallo, Trapani, Messina), Lampedusa and the mainland (Taranto).

Information from Libya, where around 650,000 migrants and refugees are recorded as currently present, suggests that the COVID-19 public health crisis has not discouraged people from trying to reach Europe, especially due to the tense situation in Libya, and the exacerbation of the conflict between the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) and the House of Representatives (HoR).

In December 2019, the UN Security Council expressed concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Libya, and called for the closure of migrant detention centres.<sup>9</sup> The conflict in Tripoli is

<sup>9</sup> UNSMIL (02.12.2019), Security Council Press Statement on Libya: <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/security-council-press-statement-libya-02-december-2019>.

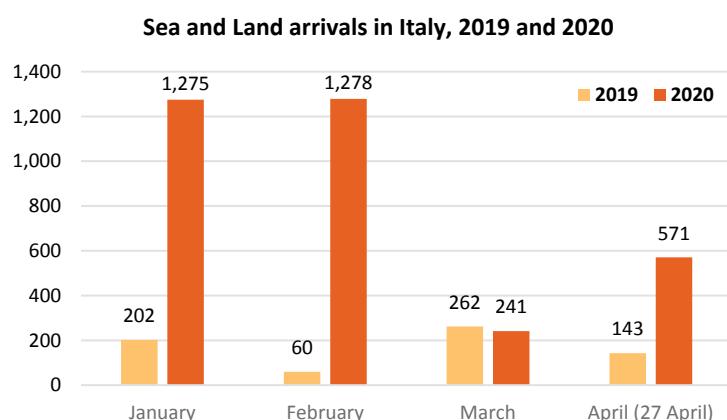
reportedly severely affecting healthcare services, further reducing access to hospitals and water and sanitation facilities in Greater Tripoli and the Western region.<sup>10</sup>

In March 2020, Libyan authorities put in place public health measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19, which include domestic and international travel and mobility restrictions, and specifically ordered the immediate closure of airports, points of entry along land borders and maritime boundaries. The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Italy, and indeed in Europe, were identified on 31 January 2020 in Rome. The Italian Government imposed a State of Emergency and a national lockdown on 11 March, closed its borders and requested all non-essential workers to stay home. On 7 April 2020, the Italian Government declared that, due to the pandemic, Italian ports could no longer be considered safe harbours, and thereby prohibited Search and Rescue (SAR) operations conducted by foreign vessels, apart from the Italian SAR, from docking in Italy.<sup>11</sup> Two days after the Italian Government declared that they would not allow SAR vessels to dock, the Libyan GNA refused to allow a border control operation by Libyan Coast Guard vessels to dock, declaring that Libyan ports could no longer be considered a safe harbours for the disembarkation of migrants due to the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

In assessing this smuggling route it should be noted that at the end of 2019, Italy and Libya renewed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at supporting border management in Libya, as well as increasing return operations for refugees and migrants from Libya to their countries of origin or “safe third countries”.

Despite the limitations to the SAR operations, since the beginning of 2020, a total of 3,366 people have arrived in Italy irregularly from Libya and Tunisia (as of 27 April), which represents a significant increase compared to the same period in 2019 (667 people).<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 6: Number of people arriving in Italy during January to April 2020, compared to the same months of 2019**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on Italian Ministry of Interior data:  
[www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero), accessed 27.04.2020.

<sup>10</sup> OCHA (13.04.2020) Situation Report No.1: Libya: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/covid-19\\_situation\\_report\\_no.1\\_libya\\_13apr2020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/covid-19_situation_report_no.1_libya_13apr2020.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Italian Ministry of Transport, Interministerial Decree, 7 April 2020.

<sup>12</sup> International Organisation for Migration (09.04.2020). “Libya Considers Its Ports Unsafe for the Disembarkation of Migrants,” Press Release: [www.iom.int/news/libya-considers-its-ports-unsafe-disembarkation-migrants?fbclid=IwAR1McLEaR1SjmNxX\\_oKbdyMuOG-td1srzvEwNTO8Zld86c2bEJGSwMqxGjs](http://www.iom.int/news/libya-considers-its-ports-unsafe-disembarkation-migrants?fbclid=IwAR1McLEaR1SjmNxX_oKbdyMuOG-td1srzvEwNTO8Zld86c2bEJGSwMqxGjs).

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR data, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>, accessed 27.04.2020.

A preliminary analysis suggests that the COVID-19 crisis has not had a significant effect in terms of disrupting smuggling operations, as people continue to be smuggled along this route.

While both countries are restricting opportunities for disembarkations for migrants at sea, people have continued to arrive, with an increased risk for the safety of people at sea. During the first two weeks of April 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that 800 refugees and migrants had been rescued off the Libyan coast, in four different operations. On 3 April, 280 people, mostly from Bangladesh, Syria, Chad and Sudan, were rescued by humanitarian NGO vessels and repatriated to Libya. On 6 April, with two operations, the German NGO ship "Alan Kurdi" rescued 150 people, while on 15 April, 47 people sailing towards Malta on a wooden boat with five dead bodies on board were intercepted by a merchant ship in the SAR zone and returned to Libya. On 18 April, Libyan National Army (LNA) forces arrested high-level smugglers responsible for the detention centre in Sabratha, where violations of international human rights laws were perpetrated against refugees and migrants during 2012-2017.

The threat of COVID-19 has not stopped the ongoing conflict in Libya. Before the conflict, many West Africans migrated to Libya in order to find work. Since then, many of those working in Libya have tried to leave, boarding vessels at seaports on the Northern coast of the country in order to arrive in Italy or, in a smaller number of cases, Malta.<sup>14</sup> The situation in Libya raises concerns on the conditions of stranded refugees and migrants. It is widely documented how they are exposed to systematic extortion, abuses and human trafficking, and the current crisis will likely increase these risks. Furthermore, in times of pandemic, refugees and migrants are also exposed to the health threat of the virus and often have limited or no access to proper treatment or basic sanitary conditions.

## Risks of smuggling of migrants and human trafficking to North America

During recent years (2018 and 2019), the numbers of migrants and refugees smuggled across the Mexican border to the United States has remained constant. The total number of apprehensions at the border was around 550,000 in 2018, with Mexican and Central Americans recorded in roughly the same proportions as during the previous two years.

Political and security challenges are among the drivers of irregular migration journeys both towards North America and within Latin America, including extremely high levels of violence in some Central American countries and the Venezuelan crisis. These critical situations have the potential to worsen with the COVID-19-related restrictions on movement and economic activities.

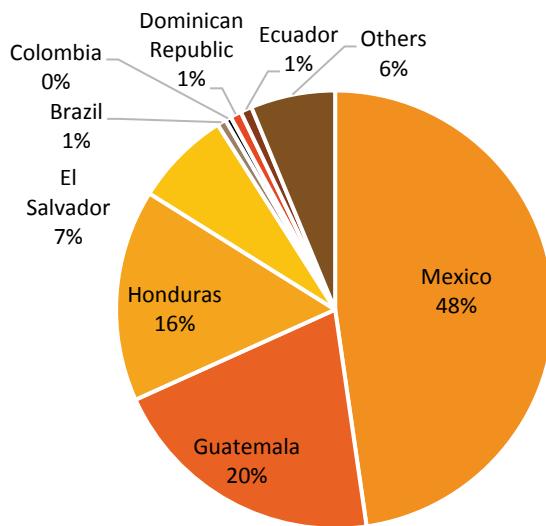
According to UNHCR, the number of asylum applicants from Honduras increased globally by 27 per cent in 2019. The increasing numbers relate to a deteriorating domestic situation and organized crime and violence, which have driven many people to leave the country. UNHCR reports that many people fleeing these circumstances resort to migrant smugglers and some become victims of human trafficking.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> UNODC Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018: [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM\\_2018\\_Africa\\_web\\_small.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM_2018_Africa_web_small.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, Fact Sheet January 2020: [http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20NCA%20situation%20Factsheet%20-%20January%202020\\_0.pdf](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20NCA%20situation%20Factsheet%20-%20January%202020_0.pdf).

**Figure 7: Share of nationalities of people subject to deportation by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – Fiscal Year 2019**



Source: Immigration and Customs Enforcement – United States of America.

On 22 April 2020, the US President signed an Executive Order barring regular immigration to the United States, with a few exceptions.<sup>16</sup> A reduction in migration to the United States due to COVID-19 restrictions would have a significant economic impact on the entire Central American region. Countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are dependent on migrants' remittances (accounting for between 13-21 per cent of their GDPs), which mainly originate from the United States of America.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the situation of Venezuelans is of particular concern, with over 1.8 million Venezuelans residing in Colombia alone, and over 4.8 million Venezuelan refugees worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Most of the people fleeing Venezuela do so to protect themselves from: violence, including threats and persecution; food and medicine shortages; poor access to social services; and loss of income. Currently, the vast majority of people fleeing the country reside in other Latin American countries, and some are also applying for asylum in the US.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Proclamation Suspending Entry of Immigrants Who Present Risk to the U.S. Labor Market During the Economic Recovery Following the COVID-19 Outbreak: [www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspending-entry-immigrants-present-risk-u-s-labor-market-economic-recovery-following-covid-19-outbreak/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspending-entry-immigrants-present-risk-u-s-labor-market-economic-recovery-following-covid-19-outbreak/). Exceptions include: spouses and minor children of US citizens; healthcare professionals; members of the US Armed Forces and their spouses and children; investor visas; and special immigrant visas for Iraqi and Afghan nationals who have worked for the US Government.

<sup>17</sup> World Bank Annual Remittances Data (updated as of Oct. 2019): [www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data](http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data).

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, Fact Sheet January 2020: <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Venezuela%20situation%20factsheet%20-%20January%202020.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR, Fact Sheet January 2020: <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Venezuela%20situation%20factsheet%20-%20January%202020.pdf>.

How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America

**Table 2: Number of Venezuelans in Latin and North American countries, April 2020**

Residence permits and regular stay granted			
Last updated 06 Apr 2020			
Location name	Source	Data date	Population
Colombia	Government	29-Feb-20	799.373
Peru	Government	07-Feb-20	628.976
Chile	Government	30-Jun-19	472.827
Argentina	Government	23-Jan-20	192.46
Brazil	Government	30-Nov-19	123.507
Ecuador	Government	31-May-19	107.052
Panama	Government	29-Feb-20	74.802
Mexico	Government	31-Dec-19	52.982
Uruguay	Government	29-Feb-20	16.404
Guyana	Government	11-Nov-19	11.881
Dominican Republic	Government	30-Jun-19	7.946
Costa Rica	Government	31-Dec-19	6.164
Curaçao	Government	31-Dec-18	1.291
Paraguay	Government	08-Jan-20	1.191

Total asylum claims per country			
Last updated 06 Apr 2020			
Location name	Source	Data date	Population
Peru	Government	31-Dec-19	482.571
Brazil	Government	30-Nov-19	129.988
United States of America	Government	31-Dec-19	108.942
Spain	Government	15-Jan-20	76.401
Mexico	Government	02-Apr-20	19.96
Trinidad and Tobago	UNHCR	31-Jan-20	17.391
Costa Rica	Government	30-Jun-19	16.236
Ecuador	Government	31-Dec-18	13.535
Panama	Government	31-Dec-19	11.205
Colombia	Government	08-May-19	5.303
Canada	Government	31-Jan-19	4.273
Chile	Government	31-Dec-19	3.499
Argentina	Government	31-Dec-19	3.457
Various	UNHCR	05-Dec-19	1.959
Uruguay	Government	31-Jan-20	632
Curaçao	UNHCR	31-Dec-19	379

Source: UNHCR

People fleeing Venezuela were already affected by a series of risks including human trafficking, kidnapping and extortion during their migration journeys and on arrival. Mobility restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic may put these vulnerable people at even greater risk.

## THE MEDIUM-LONG TERM IMPACT - WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE IMPACT OF THE 2008 FINANCIAL CRISIS ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS AND SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS?

Certain communities suffering economic crisis sometimes find some relief in labor migration, as remittances from people working abroad are, for some countries, instrumental for family survival and national economic development. When labor migration is hindered by restrictions on cross-border mobility or prohibitive residence status or work permit requirements, some migrant workers may still attempt to migrate by resorting to migrant smugglers.

At the same time, poverty and unemployment are among the factors of vulnerability linked to trafficking in persons. Deteriorations in economic and labor conditions in origin countries may increase the number of people willing to risk unsafe migration journeys and working opportunities. Traffickers take advantage of this economic vulnerability and instead of offering the promised labor opportunities, they exploit migrants at destination. This dynamic is reflected in the identification of victims from countries suffering poverty and unemployment in richer destination countries.

Between 2007 and 2009, many economies around the world were seriously affected by the financial crisis and slump in activity. It is estimated that more than 60 countries went into recession as a consequence of the economic downturn initiated by this financial crisis. The global downturn first touched the major world economies in 2007 and impacted on their outputs during the two following years. High-income economies experienced an average reduction of 7.5% in real GDP during the fourth quarter of 2008, and output continued to fall almost as fast during the first quarter of the following year.

The financial crisis quickly turned into an economic and social crisis, with increasing unemployment rates both in richer and poorer countries. Not all countries, however, were affected in the same way.

### The impact on Smuggling of Migrants to North America

During the economic downturn resulting from the 2008 financial crisis, the rapid increase in unemployment in the United States resulted in a reduction in overall migration inflows in the short term. As part of broader regular and irregular migration patterns, unemployment in the major destination country also led to a reduction in migrant smuggling into the USA. Statistics have shown that when US unemployment goes up, less people attempt to cross its borders irregularly<sup>20</sup>.

The reduced migration flows were also reflected in a reduction in migrants' remittances out of the United States, as well as a concomitant reduction in remittances inflows to Mexico and Central American countries, countries of origin for many migrants in the US.

As smugglers facilitate around 90 per cent of irregular crossings from Mexico to the United States,<sup>21</sup> the reduction in irregular migration to the US following the onset of the 2008 economic crisis was also

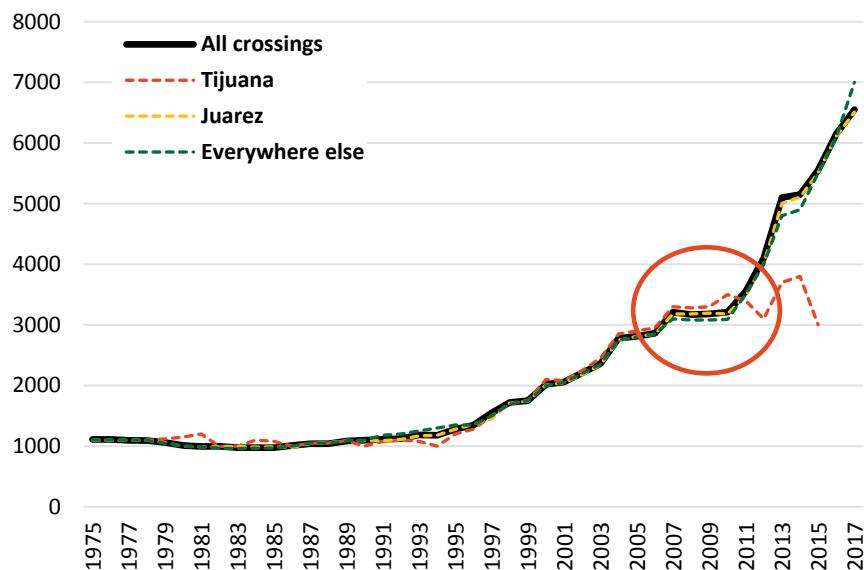
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<sup>20</sup> Costantino, Fabrizio, "Irregular Immigration, Labour Market and Enforcement at the US-Mexico Border. Evidence from a Time-Series Analysis (1963–2014)" in INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, v. 2016 / Vol. 54, n. Issue n°3 (2016), p. 125-138

<sup>21</sup> Mexican Migration Project – Periodical Surveys on Mexican Migrants.

reflected in a stagnation of the fees smugglers charged to facilitate irregular crossings of the Mexican-US border during 2007-2011, due to a decreased demand for their services.

**Figure 8: Border crossing smuggling fees from Mexico to the United States (South West Border), 1975-2017**



Source: Mexican Migration Project – Periodical Surveys on Mexican Migrants

While in the short run, the rise in unemployment rates in the US may have resulted in a reduction of immigration flows, including those facilitated by smugglers, in the medium to longer term, a slower recovery in certain countries of origin resulted in more labor migration flows to the US, including people travelling irregularly, using smugglers.

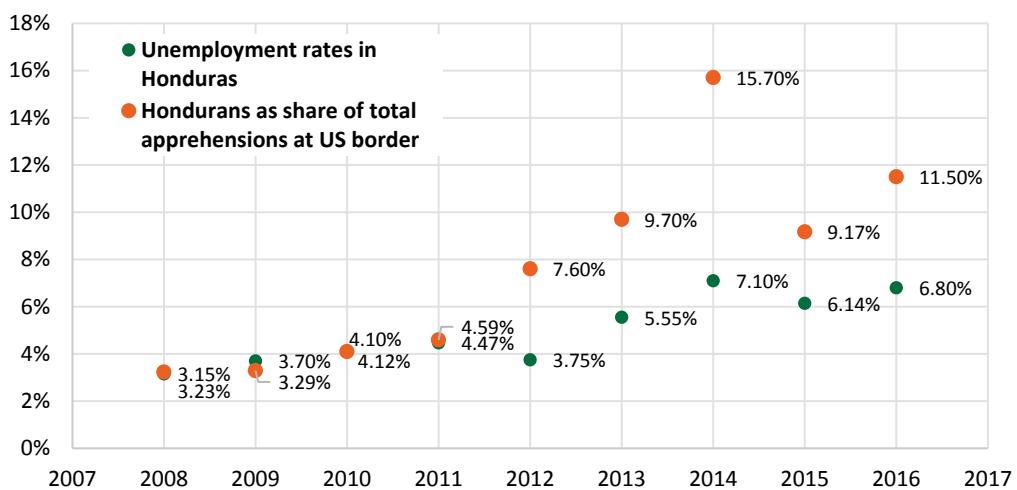
Honduras was one of the countries particularly affected by the crisis and still today, it records levels of unemployment above those before the crisis. During the ten years after 2007, Hondurans were increasingly detected attempting irregular crossings of the US-Mexican border, from 33,800 in 2008 to 107,000 in 2014 and 91,150 still in 2018.

In 2014, migrants' remittances accounted for about 20 per cent of Honduran GDP,<sup>22</sup> the vast majority of these (87 per cent) from the United States. To make a comparison with El Salvador, a country that recovered from the crisis at a faster pace, apprehensions of Salvadorian migrants at the US border registered a reduction since 2014 (about 80,000 apprehensions in 2014 and 42,000 in 2018).

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<sup>22</sup> World Bank data on remittances.

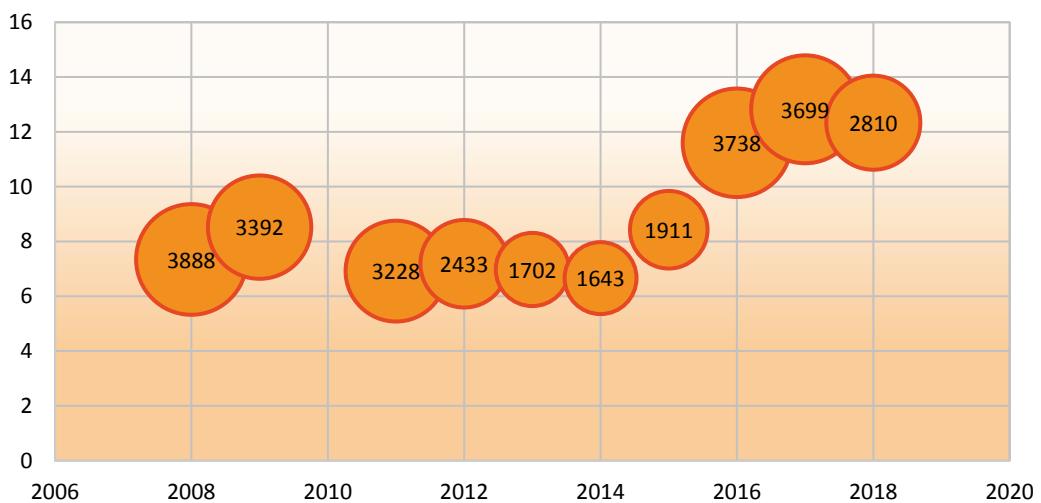
**Figure 9: Hondurans as share of total apprehensions at the US and unemployment rate in Honduras, 2008-2016**



Source: UNODC Elaboration based on ILO Estimates and US apprehensions data from Department of Homeland Security

The graph shows that when unemployment rates in Honduras go up, more citizens of Honduras are apprehended attempting irregular crossings at the US-Mexican borders<sup>23</sup>. Similar results are found for Mexican unemployment rates and US apprehensions of Mexican migrants,<sup>24</sup> for Brazilian migrants,<sup>25</sup> and for Colombian migrants.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 10: Relationship between number of Brazilian migrants apprehended at US border (size of the bubble) and Unemployment rates in Brazil (Y-axis), 2008-2018**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on ILO Estimates and US apprehension data

<sup>23</sup> Dependent variable Honduran migrants as share of total border apprehensions, independent variable Unemployment rates in Honduras (std coeff B .834 and sig .001); Linear regression R sq: 0.700, sig. 0.001.

<sup>24</sup> Dependent variable Mexican migrants as share of total border apprehensions, independent variable Unemployment rates in Mexico (std coeff B .652 and sig .030); Linear regression R sq: 0.426, sig. 0.030.

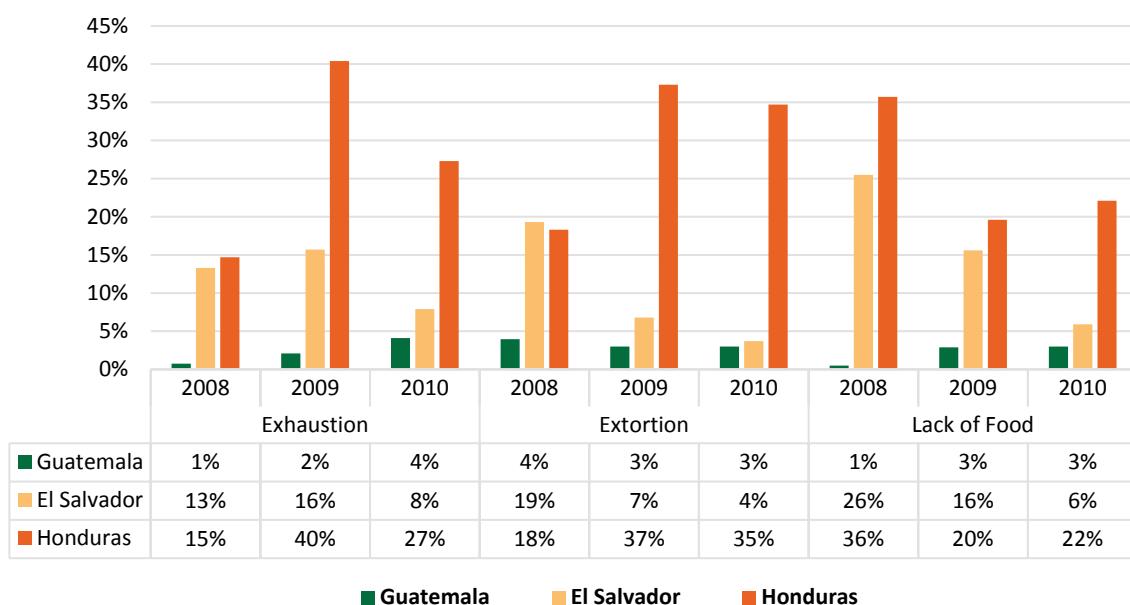
<sup>25</sup> Dependent variable Brazilian migrants as share of total border apprehensions, independent variable Unemployment rates in Brazil (std coeff B .843 and sig .002); Linear regression R sq: 0.711, sig. 0.002.

<sup>26</sup> Dependent variable Colombian migrants as share of total border apprehensions, independent variable Unemployment rates in Colombia (std coeff B .801 and sig .003); Linear regression R sq: 0.641, sig. 0.003.

Given these patterns, it is reasonable to imagine that future increases in the unemployment rates in these countries resulting from the lockdown measures in place to reduce the diffusion of the virus will likely result in increased smuggling of migrants from these countries to the United States.

Furthermore, migrants from poorer countries will likely face more abuses and risks during irregular migration journeys compared to other migrants. According to periodical surveys of Central American migrants in Mexico *en route* to the United States, during the years that followed the 2008 economic crisis, Hondurans were those who most frequently risked their lives during the journey, and who paid the highest smuggling fees - 4,500 US Dollars on average in 2010 -, while Salvadorians paid on average 3,250 USD and Guatemalans 3,230 USD. Among these three nationalities, Hondurans were generally the poorest, with this country registering the lowest GDP per capita in the northern triangle of Central America even before the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

**Figure 11: Most frequently mentioned risks (Exhaustion, Extortion, Lack of Food) by Central American immigrants in their transit through Mexico, by country of origin, 2008-2010**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on data from Emif-Sur

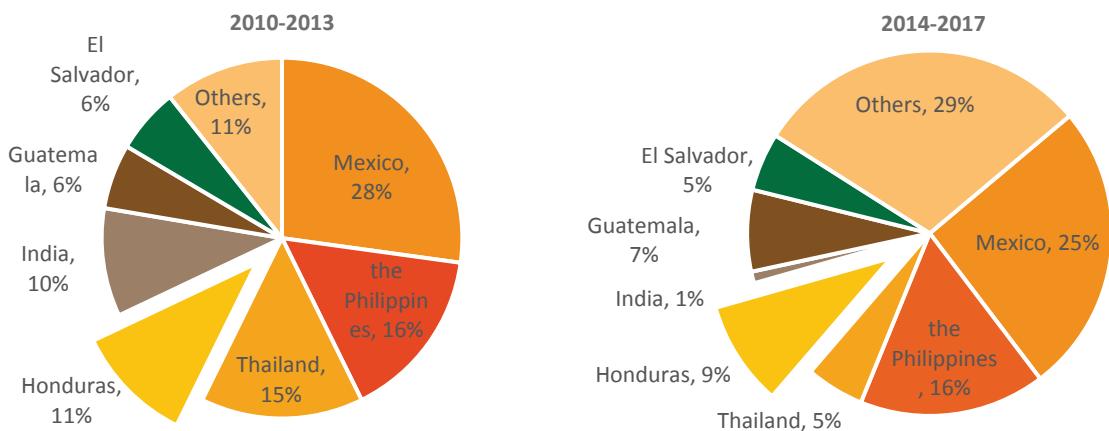
## ...on Trafficking in Persons in North America

Smuggled migrants are at risk of exploitation both during their journey and after their arrival in the destination country. The irregular status that smuggled migrants often have in both transit and destination countries leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. This vulnerability can be exacerbated further by economic distress. Not only do smugglers sometimes seek to take advantage of irregular migrants, but local opportunists may also seek to exploit them. These situations can lead to abuse and human trafficking.

As reported above, during the years of the financial crisis, Hondurans were the poorest among Central American migrants travelling to the United States and suffered more risks as compared to their fellow Central Americans along the routes to the United States. This situation made them more vulnerable to becoming victims of trafficking in persons. In fact, Hondurans were among the most detected trafficking victims among Central American countries reported in the United States for the years 2010-

2013 and since. Hondurans seem to be particularly at risk, vis-à-vis other nationals, especially considering that this Central American country has a small population.

**Figure 12: Share of detected foreign victims of trafficking in persons in the United States of America, 2010-2013 and 2014-2017**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on US data

The experiences of Honduran migrants, compared to Salvadorians or Guatemalans, shows that those communities suffering higher unemployment rates and poverty for a longer time are at higher risk of being trafficked, compared to others in a relatively better economic situation.

Still representing only a fraction of trafficking into the United States, the example of Honduras as compared to other Central American countries shows the connectivity between the macro-economic dynamics in the countries of origin and the propensity to become a victim of trafficking in persons. But these dynamics do not automatically apply in the same way to all migrants; improved employment opportunities in Mexico, for instance, do not seem to have contributed to reducing the number of identified Mexican trafficking victims in the US.

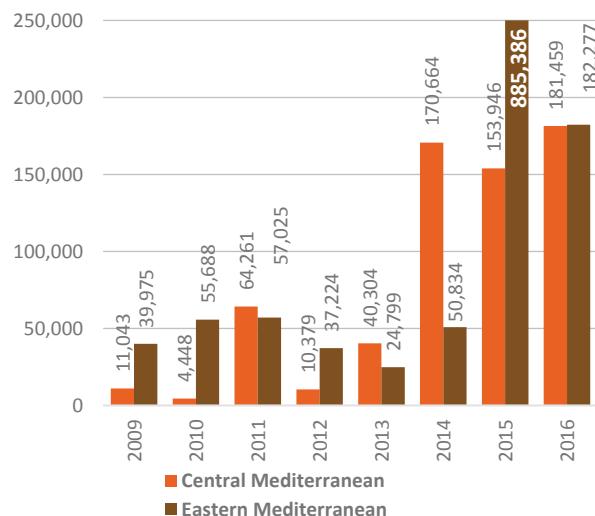
## ... on Smuggling of Migrants in Europe

Migration patterns in the countries of the European Union are different to those recorded in the United States of America. The proportions of people fleeing from conflict and persecution among irregular and smuggled migrants tend to be higher for those travelling to the European Union than for those travelling to the US. Many people from outside the EU who are smuggled into the EU are granted international protection (such as Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians, Eritreans, Somalis and Sudanese). There is also significant labor migration within the EU, towards more affluent countries, but EU citizens enjoy free movement and access to labor markets and therefore do not require migrant smuggling services.

Sudden changes in the numbers of migrants smuggled to the EU during the years 2009–2016 indicate a link between smuggling of migrants towards Europe and conflict. After a marked reduction in smuggling flows during 2009-2010,<sup>27</sup> there were high peaks from 2012 onwards, related to refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict and the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan.

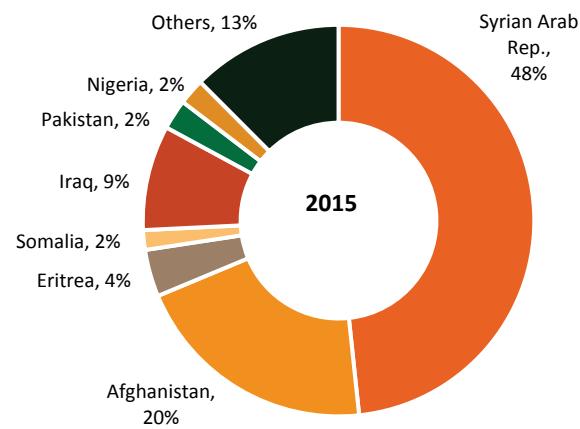
<sup>27</sup> The number of arrivals in Lampedusa and EU unemployment rates are negatively correlated until the year 2010; Statistical correlation is moderate and negative ( $r: -0.55$ ,  $\text{sig}: 0.05$ ).

**Figure 13: Number of detected irregular border crossings along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes, 2009-2016**

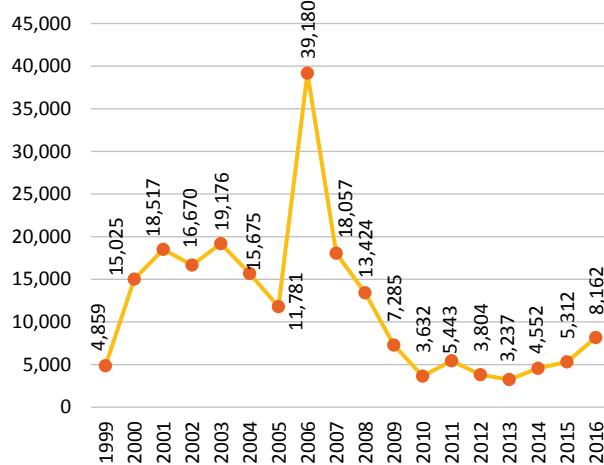


Source: Frontex.

**Figure 15: People who arrived in the European Union along the three Mediterranean routes, by country of citizenship, 2015**

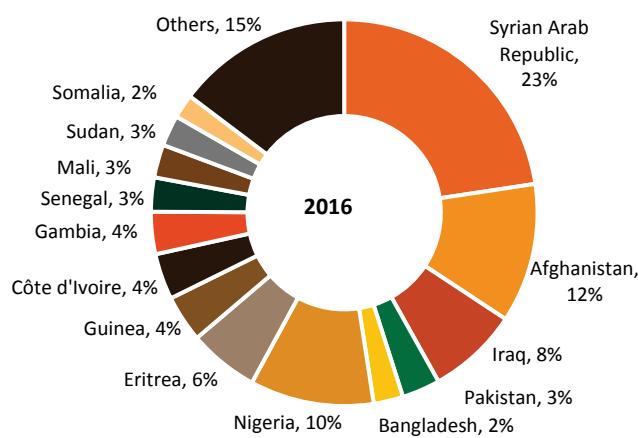


**Figure 14: Number of irregular migrants arriving on Spanish coasts, mainland and the Canary Islands, 1999-2016**



Source: Spanish Ministry of Interior.

**Figure 16: People who arrived in the European Union along the three Mediterranean routes, by country of citizenship, 2016**



Source: UNHCR

It can be concluded that, historically, smuggling of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea is determined by a combination of factors. Seeking secure livelihoods and better economic prospects is certainly one of the drivers, but international and national political and security aspects have had a major impact in driving smuggling flows across the Mediterranean.

## ... on Trafficking in Persons in Europe

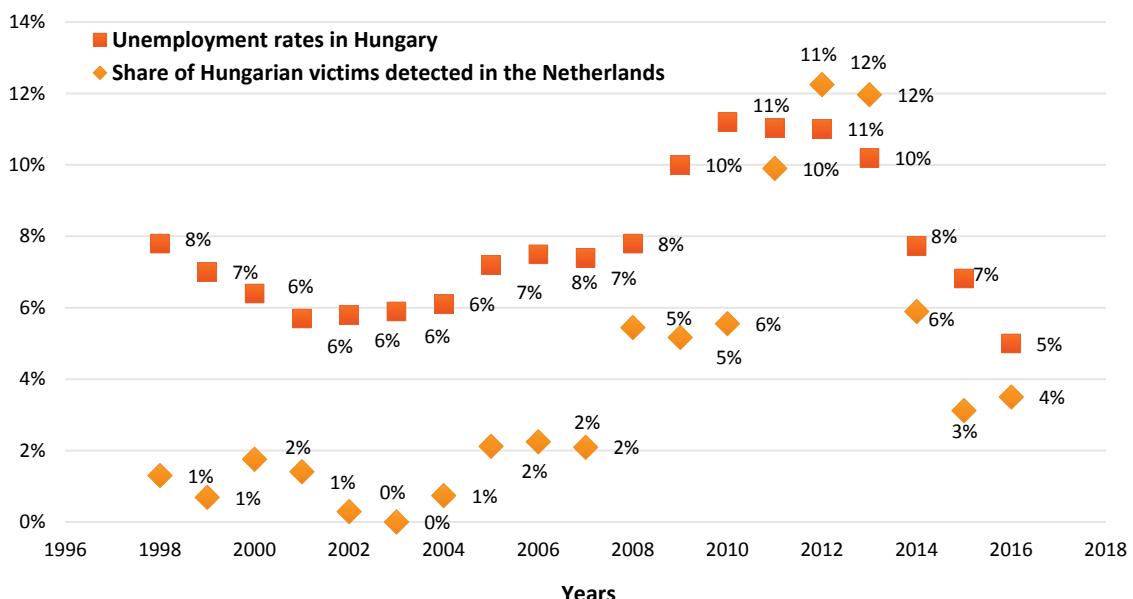
While most migrants in the European Union are EU citizens who do not need to be smuggled, regular migration and mobility does not preclude the risk of being exploited. A context of lower socio-economic status within some EU countries is still a risk factor for human trafficking, whether or not people need to apply for a visa or residence permit. Over the last 10 years, more than 60 per cent of victims of trafficking detected in the European Union were EU citizens, both nationals and from other EU countries.<sup>28</sup>

As an example of a country that faced unequal economic opportunities as compared to other EU countries, Hungary was negatively affected by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and since then it has recorded increasing unemployment rates. Unlike other countries in Central and South East Europe, Hungary suffered higher unemployment rates for a longer time. Between 2008 and 2016, the unemployment rate in Hungary increased from 7 per cent to 12 per cent.

During the same period, the proportion of Hungarian victims of trafficking detected in some Western European countries increased drastically. The graph below shows that unemployment rate fluctuations paralleled the number of Hungarian victims detected in the Netherlands, for instance.<sup>29</sup>

Similar patterns are visible between Bulgarian victims detected in the Netherlands and unemployment in Bulgaria, and Russian victims with Russian unemployment rates.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 17: Relationship between unemployment rates in Hungary and share of Hungarian trafficking victims identified in the Netherlands (1998 – 2016)**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on ILO estimates (unemployment) and Dutch National Rapporteur (trafficking victims)

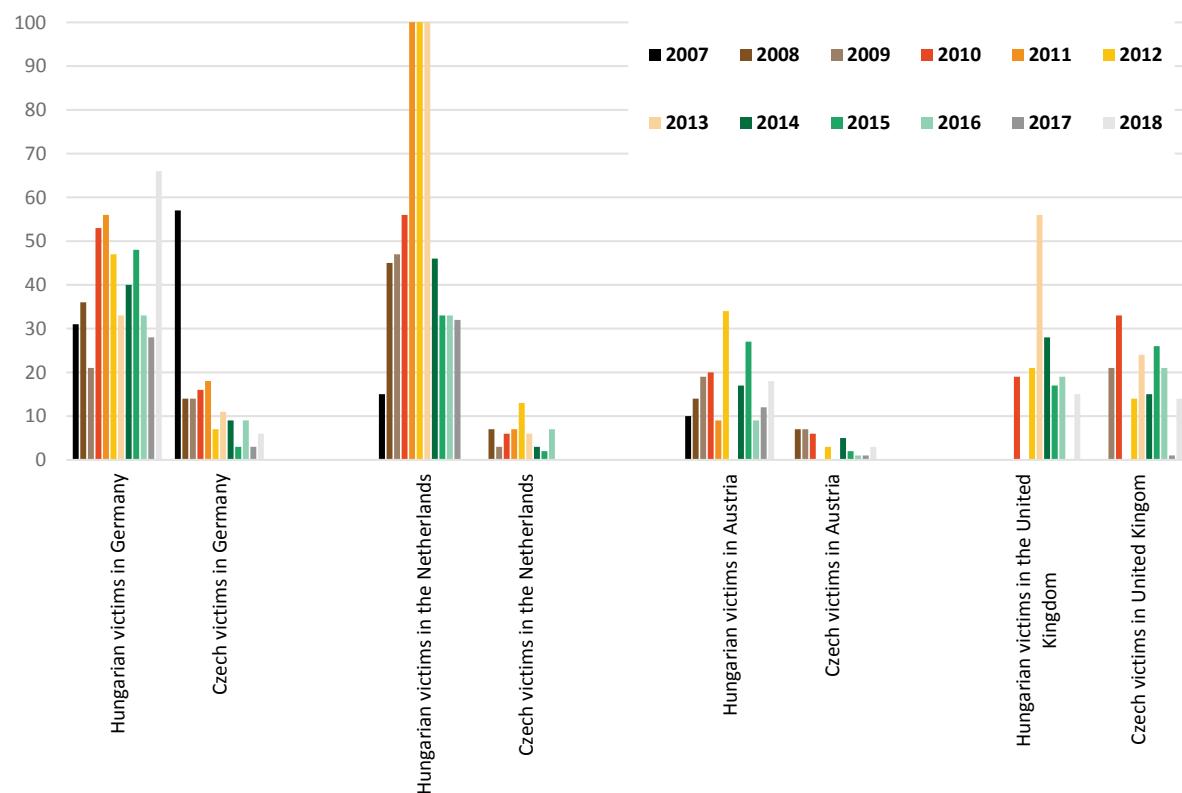
<sup>28</sup> See: UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons editions 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Dependent variable Detected Hungarian victims as share of total detection in the Netherlands, independent variable Unemployment rates in Hungary (stnd coeff B 23.834 and sig .001); Linear regression R sq: 0.558, sig. 0.001.

<sup>30</sup> Dependent variable Detected Russian victims as share of total detection in the Netherlands, independent variable Unemployment rates in the Russian Federation (stnd coeff B 2.362 and sig .001); Linear regression R sq: 0.508, sig. 0.001.

Compared to Hungary, during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and its aftermath, Czechia recorded a less marked increase in national unemployment rates. This resulted in a comparatively lower number of detected trafficking victims from Czechia compared to Hungarian victims.

**Figure 18: Number of detected Hungarian and Czech trafficking victims in selected countries, 2007 – 2018**



Source: UNODC elaboration based on national data

This shows that economic conditions in countries of origin sometimes play a role in determining trafficking flows from these countries to countries of destination. Future economic recessions will likely have an impact in terms of human trafficking outflows directed to more affluent countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

The global crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and it is difficult to predict its impact on trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants. In this paper, UNODC sought to understand the potential short and long-term effects of the pandemic and related restrictions on human trafficking and migrant smuggling flows to Europe and North America, two of the most relevant destination regions for both crimes.

In the short term, the most recent data on the three Mediterranean migrant smuggling routes suggest these flows are continuing despite the lockdown measures in Turkey, and in North African and European countries, the economic consequences and the mobility restrictions. Arrivals from North Africa to Italy and from Morocco to Spain did not decrease during the first months of 2020. The smuggling flow along the Eastern Mediterranean route appears to have decreased, though this is perhaps more due to migration containment measures put in place to prevent departures.

Across the Mediterranean routes, migrants and refugees are caught between the need to flee conflicts, human rights abuses and poverty, dangerous open waters, the reduced Search and Rescue operations at sea and, now, the risks of COVID-19 transmission *en route*. The living conditions of these migrants and refugees should be of primary concern for the international community.

In other parts of the world, the medium-long term economic consequences resulting from the lockdown measures introduced to reduce the spread of COVID-19 may have an impact on trafficking and smuggling flows. In the past, countries particularly affected by prolonged unemployment have become relevant origin countries for both migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons flows to more affluent countries.

What emerges from an analysis of the economic impact on human trafficking is that an asymmetric recovery from the impending global economic crisis, with some countries more affected than others, may increase the risks of trafficking for people in economic need.

This may be even more dramatic if the economic downturn is combined with continued stringent mobility restrictions.

The potential human rights impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on travel, movement and economic activities – and of the consequent economic downturn – on smuggling of migrants and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America may be severe. These negative impacts can be mitigated by investments in job creation and economic recovery across both developed and developing countries. The consequences in terms of increased crime, abuse, violence, exploitation and trafficking can be ameliorated by ensuring that providing avenues for safe and regular migration journeys for refugees and migrants, and regular immigration status in destination countries, is a key element of post-COVID-19 recovery plans.

## UNODC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIONS

In the effort to halt the global spread of COVID-19 and save lives, strict control measures are in place in many countries at a scale previously unseen in peace time. In addressing the pandemic, we should not overlook the real and concrete risks that this unprecedented situation presents for vulnerable individuals and groups, who are not always very visible in our societies. A much-needed focus on alleviating the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic should not and must not exclude the disadvantaged and underprivileged. Recovering from the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to look at deeply entrenched inequalities in our economic development model that feed marginalization, gender-based violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons.

Human trafficking is the result of the failure of our societies and economies to protect the most vulnerable and enforce rights under national laws. They should not be additionally ‘punished’ during times of emergency.

**COVID-19 responses must be continuously monitored.** Where such measures unintentionally negatively impact vulnerable groups, such as trafficking victims, adjustments must be made to minimize harm and to ensure the needs of such groups are adequately addressed.

While prioritizing public health, a **culture of rule of law needs to prevail**. Anti-trafficking responses must continue to be based on human rights, while access to health care and social support without discrimination should be guaranteed.

**Access to justice must be safeguarded.** Where feasible, technology should be utilised to facilitate access to judicial processes and enable the collection and provision of evidence, the submission of documents and the filing or adjudicating of motions or petitions to courts.

**Law enforcement officials must remain vigilant** in addressing new and evolving crime patterns and adapt their responses to prevent human traffickers from acting with impunity during the pandemic.

Despite the anticipated slowing down of economies because of COVID-19 and the resulting pressures on national budgets, **countries must continue supporting anti-trafficking work** and adapt their assistance programmes to the new and extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic and its aftermath.

**Service providers must remain flexible** and adapt to an evolving environment in order to meet the needs of their communities.

**There is a need for systematic data collection and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons.** There is no country immune to the pandemic and as COVID-19 does not affect all regions at the same time, experience from one country could be vital to others.

### UNODC Response

Developing rapid assessment tools for countries to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on essential services for victims as well as on law enforcement and justice capacities.

Providing grants to NGOs through the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking to offer services to victims of trafficking who need more support during the COVID-19 crisis.

Facilitating cross-border cooperation at the request of countries.

Supporting anti-trafficking units at their request to procure personal protective equipment to interact safely with victims.

Conducting studies on the impact of the pandemic on victims of human trafficking and the modus operandi of organized crime groups.

Establishing a Women's Leaders Network under UNODC Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling for the Middle East and Asia that will also look at the vulnerabilities of women to trafficking in persons during the pandemic.

Offering many of its courses against trafficking in persons on its eLearning platform free of charge and in different languages starting from the region of South Eastern Europe.

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## ANNEX - METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This Research Brief seeks to assess the short and medium-to-long term impacts of the consequences of COVID-19 related measures on smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons to North America and Europe.

In order to do so, the authors use official data from national authorities and international organizations. The data used to approximate smuggling of migrants to the United States of America refers to apprehensions of people irregularly crossing the US-Mexico border, published by the US Department of Homeland Security. Information concerning irregular arrivals of refugees and migrants in Europe, having crossed the Mediterranean Sea, is reported by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Not all refugees and migrants arriving irregularly are smuggled, as they may not use a smuggler to enter or stay irregularly in a country. At the same time, not all those who are smuggled are detected and an unknown proportion of migrant smuggling goes unreported. Smugglers, however, facilitate the irregular border crossings of most of those apprehended at the South West border of the United States<sup>31</sup> and the journeys of most of those arriving irregularly in Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>32</sup> The information used is intended to approximate the smuggling flows and the profile of the refugees and migrants smuggled.

Similarly, to assess trafficking in persons flows, the authors use official data on the citizenships of the victims of trafficking detected in the United States of America and the Netherlands. Detected victims only represent a part of the trafficking phenomenon. With certain caveats, however, this data can be used to assess the profiles of the victims and the dynamics of the trafficking flows<sup>33</sup>.

In order to understand the possible effects of the economic consequences of COVID-19 on smuggling and trafficking flows, the authors have used *Unemployment Rates* derived from International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates. The use of this indicator is based on the hypothesis that people in need of employment are particularly vulnerable to accepting job offers with risks of exploitation. These estimates are based on periodical labour force surveys and are not affected by the rates of people employed in the informal sector<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Mexican Migration Project – Periodical Surveys on Mexican Migrants.

<sup>32</sup> UNODC *Global Study of Smuggling of Migrants 2018*, page 55

<sup>33</sup> UNODC *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016*, page 39

<sup>34</sup> See ILO estimates information available at <https://ilo.org>