



INTERPOL

CONNECTING POLICE FOR A SAFER WORLD

People smuggling: questions and answers

1. WHAT IS PEOPLE SMUGGLING?

People smugglers arrange for migrants who do not have the required visas and paperwork to cross international borders. This can be done by providing fake identification documents, organizing transport, and bypassing official border controls.

1.1 Definition used by the international community

According to the [United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, Article 3 \(2004\)](#):

“Smuggling of migrants” shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.”

“Illegal entry” shall mean crossing borders without complying with the necessary requirements for legal entry into the receiving State.”

2. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PEOPLE SMUGGLING AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

A broad distinction can be made between people smuggling and human trafficking. In general, the individuals who pay a smuggler in order to gain illegal entry to a country do so voluntarily, and the relationship ends on arrival. People who have been trafficked, on the other hand, are exploited on arrival and there are often elements of fraud, force or other coercion present.

Clearly, both human trafficking and people smuggling are complex crimes, and it is important to recognize that there is potential for overlap.

3. BUT AREN'T SMUGGLERS JUST TRYING TO HELP PEOPLE ESCAPE DESPERATE SITUATIONS?

Irregular migration is not a new issue, but is one that has taken on new proportions in recent years. Thousands of people are leaving their home countries to escape conflict and poverty, and taking desperate measures to try and reach European countries, in search of a better life.

Not all irregular migrants are smuggled. However, the reality is that transnational organized crime groups are taking advantage of the current humanitarian crisis in order to make huge profits. They facilitate the passage of migrants across borders in return for payment, with little or no regard for their safety and wellbeing. Conditions of transport are inhumane and the journeys are hazardous. In many cases, people die on these journeys.

According to the [International Organization for Migration](#), nearly 3,700 migrants are estimated to have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea between 1 January and 23 October 2016.

A report published jointly by Europol and INTERPOL in May 2016 estimates that more than 90% of the migrants coming to the EU are facilitated, mostly by members of a criminal network. These numbers are expected to increase in the future in response to control measures taken by countries along the migratory routes.

For the smugglers, profits are the driving force behind their activities. The [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) estimates that USD 6.75 billion is generated by the smuggling of migrants on two principle routes alone: from East, North and West Africa to Europe and from South to North America.

4. WHO ARE THE CRIMINALS?

Smuggling networks can be extensive and complex, and can include people who carry out a number of different criminal activities, for example, recruiters, boat captains, middlemen, people who provide falsified travel documents, those who rent out illegal apartments, scouts and money launderers.

INTERPOL is working with its member countries to identify the organized criminal networks that take advantage of people's desperation in order to make a profit. Our activities focus on identifying and arresting criminals involved in smuggling, and not the migrants themselves.

5. WHAT OTHER CRIMES ARE LINKED?

There are clear links between people smuggling and other crimes such as human trafficking, illicit money flows, corruption and the use of fraudulent travel documents.

6. WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON PEOPLE SMUGGLING ROUTES?

Nearly every country in the world is affected by the smuggling of migrants in some way: either as country of source, transit or destination.

People smuggling can occur by air, sea or land, often by complex routes which change rapidly and frequently.

Among the well-established routes are:

- East, North and West Africa to Europe;
- Middle East and Central Asia to Europe;
- South America and Central America to North America;
- Asia to Australia.

7. HOW HAS TECHNOLOGY EXACERBATED THE PROBLEM?

While some migrants and smugglers make contact face-to-face at well-known meeting points, smartphones and social media play an increasing role in the smuggling process.

Organized smuggling networks use social media platforms in the same way as a legitimate travel agency, to advertise their services and attract potential customers. Their operations are organized, professionally run and follow an established business model.

But technology also acts as a screen. Smugglers often hide behind pseudonyms and change SIM cards, making it impossible for migrants to make contact if there is a problem.

At the same time, technology acts as a lifeline for migrants. The GPS assists them in their journey, while social media platforms allow them to post and consult real-time information about routes, opportunities and risks, for example border guard movements and arrests. They also use social media to obtain information on destination countries and stay in touch with family back home.

8. WHAT IS INTERPOL DOING ABOUT THE PROBLEM?

People smuggling takes place on all scales but INTERPOL's focus is on organized networks, due to their international dimension. Our response includes the following:

- Law enforcement operations to dismantle the criminal networks behind people smuggling.
- A series of databases, available in real-time and at frontline locations, including data on stolen and lost travel documents; fraudulent documents and INTERPOL notices;
- The International Contact Directory for People Smuggling Issues helps connect specialized law enforcement officers with their counterparts around the world;
- Our Integrated Border Management Task Force (IBMTF) is the central point of contact and coordination for international border-security activities at INTERPOL.

9. WHY DO INTERPOL AND EUROPOL HOLD JOINT MEETINGS?

We are seeing a massive increase in migrant flows in the Mediterranean region and beyond, and a rise in the level of associated crime. According to [Frontex](#), 1.82 million illegal crossings were detected at European Union external borders in 2015. This is six times the number of detections in 2014.

Given the scale of this crisis, there is urgent need to bring together experts from source, transit and destination countries, as well as international organizations, who are specialized in the area of people smuggling and irregular migration flows.

For this reason, INTERPOL and [Europol](#) decided to convene the first Operational Forum on Countering Migrant Smuggling Networks in October 2015. This was a tactical meeting, bringing together law enforcement officers who are directly involved in these issues. A second edition of the forum took place at the Europol Headquarters in the Hague in February 2016.

The Operational Forum on Countering Migrant Smuggling Networks can build a trusted coordination platform for police across the globe. Among its activities, this platform will provide criminal analysis, coordinate law enforcement operations and deliver targeted training.

10.WHO IS INTERPOL WORKING WITH?

We work with a number of other international organizations who are involved in the fight against people smuggling and human trafficking, including:

- Eurojust
- Europol
- Frontex
- International Organization for Migration
- International Labour Organization
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- Southeast European Law Enforcement Center
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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