

Human Smuggling: What If Philanthropists Were in Charge?

As a consumer, I'm never been scared to shop in legal but unregulated markets. Never mind the right to sue; reputation and guarantees provide all the peace of mind I need. Illegal, unregulated markets, however, are a different story. Sure, they still have an incentive to protect their reputation. But if an illegal firm's reputation gets too big, it draws unwanted attention from law enforcement. Legal enforcement is grossly overrated, but legality is a different story.

The upshot: While I'm personally strongly in favor of human smuggling to evade unjust immigration laws, I'm ambivalent about human smugglers themselves. What's the ratio of honest outlaws to ruthless predators? This article gives lots of suggestive details, but few usable numbers:

People smugglers who offer to illegally transport people into Europe are advertising their services openly on Facebook, researchers have found.

Picture and video testimonials from successful migrants are posted on social media as smuggling operations compete to be seen as the safest way to enter Europe.

Researchers are using this information to analyse the networks behind people smuggling operations in the Mediterranean.

Syrian communities displaced by the civil war are especially close users of Facebook. The country had a functional education system before the war and Syrian migrants have on average a higher level of education and digital literacy.

[...]

The importance of networks and reputations in the free market of smugglers can be seen in the evidence that Dr Campana had collected.

One recording of a wiretapped telephone call revealed how one people smuggler asked another how many of the 366 asylum seekers who had died... were his.

The wiretap records one of the smugglers berating the other for his lapse safety.

The other smuggler later began to personally notify the families of the dead and pay out \$5,000 (£3,778) in compensation to salvage his reputation.

But what's really going on? Well, the UN estimates a bit over a million crossers in 2015, with 3,771 recorded deaths. Even if you think actual deaths are *triple* the recorded rate, that's roughly a 1% fatality rate. Tragic, but given the level of smuggling and the risks required to avoid detection, it's surprisingly low. I'd definitely take a 1% chance of death to escape Syria, and probably make the same deal to escape 90% of the countries in Africa.

In fact, suppose smugglers were pure philanthropists who only wanted to help people reach Europe alive. There's a clear trade-off between the two goals - the safest routes will also be the most patrolled. So you have to wonder: If philanthropists ran the human smuggling industry, how much lower could fatality rates even fall?