

Analysis of Migrant Smuggling as a Transnational Organized Crime

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Article History

Received 22 December 2025

1st Revision 24 December 2025

2nd Revision 31 December 2025

Accepted on 05 January 2026

Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyze migrant smuggling as an organized transnational crime and examine law enforcement practices in Indonesia and their implications for the protection of migrants' human rights.

Methodology: This study uses a normative legal research method with a statutory, conceptual, and comparative approach. Data were obtained through a literature review of national and international laws and regulations, legal doctrines, and literature related to migrant smuggling.

Results: The findings indicate that migrant smuggling is a transnational organized crime involving cross-border networks. Law enforcement in Indonesia tends to focus on immigration and repressive aspects, often positioning smuggled migrants as lawbreakers rather than victims of crime.

Conclusions: A law enforcement approach that is not oriented toward human rights protection has the potential to neglect migrants' rights to liberty, personal security, and legal protection. Harmonization of criminal law and immigration policies with human rights principles and more effective international cooperation are needed.

Limitations: This study is limited to normative legal analysis and does not include empirical data from field-based law enforcement practices. As a result, the findings reflect doctrinal and conceptual interpretations rather than practical implementation. The absence of empirical evidence limits a full understanding of how migrant smuggling laws are enforced in practice, thus requiring further socio-legal research.

Contributions: This study contributes a conceptual framework for developing human rights-based legal policies in migrant smuggling cases, emphasizing the protection of migrants as victims of transnational organized crime.

Keywords: *Human Rights, Law Enforcement, Migrant Smuggling, Transnational Organized Crime*

How to Cite: Togatorop, D, T. (2026). Analysis of Migrant Smuggling as a Transnational Organized Crime. *Jurnal Ilmiah Hukum dan Hak Asasi Manusia*, 6(1), 41-48.

1. Introduction

Smuggling refers to the practice of secretly transporting goods or people in violation of the legal requirements. People from certain backgrounds are often involved in smuggling when they enter or leave a country with visible goods (Lilipaly, Tuhulele, & Daties, 2023). Migrant smuggling is a global phenomenon that is becoming increasingly complex due to rising cross-border population mobility, economic inequality, armed conflict, and weak legal migration systems in various countries. Article 3 of the UN Protocol defines human smuggling as the practice of seeking material or financial gain by illegally bringing a person into a country where they do not have citizenship or residence visa (Junef, 2020). Migrant smuggling generates revenue through service fees, which may vary depending on factors such as distance, the migrants' country of origin, and related documentation (Sirait & Narwastuty, 2022).

This practice is no longer sporadic or conducted by individuals; rather, it is conducted through structured, systematic networks involving numerous actors across jurisdictions. These conditions make migrant smuggling a form of transnational organized crime that violates national sovereignty and poses a serious threat to regional and international security. Migrant smuggling has distinct characteristics as a form of organized transnational crime. This crime not only involves document forgery but is also linked to international networks that exploit the vulnerability of refugees for financial gain ([Gultom, Syahrin, & Bakhtiar, 2025](#); [Nuriani, Suryadi, & Budiayanti, 2023](#)). In practice, migrants are often treated as objects of economic exploitation, with their safety and human rights disregarded for the financial gain of the smuggling networks. This demonstrates that migrant smuggling is not merely a matter of illegal immigration but also an issue of organized crime and humanitarian crisis. Well-organized international criminal networks carry out this smuggling through transit countries or directly. ([Dhiba & Sabinadevi, 2021](#)).

In addition to being a violation of human rights, migrant smuggling often occurs because the existing procedures to protect human rights are inadequate or fail entirely. Those being smuggled are often viewed as mere objects, without the autonomy to determine their own fate. Victims of smuggling often experience cruel treatment such as arbitrary detention, sexual exploitation, and extortion ([Armilia & Ilmih, 2024](#)). As those who migrate illegally may not have adequate access to education, health care, or legal protection, migrant smuggling and illegal migration pose major threats. Striking a balance between protecting the human rights of vulnerable people and safeguarding national security is a key objective for individuals and governments addressing this issue ([Romadhani, Hamdi, & Kurniawan, 2024](#)).

Although various national and international legal instruments have been established to prevent and combat migrant smuggling, their enforcement faces numerous obstacles. Differences in legal systems across countries, weak international cooperation, and an approach that tends to focus on criminalizing migrants rather than smuggling networks are the main hindering factors. Consequently, efforts to address this crime often fail to target the masterminds and organizational structures behind these smuggling operations. Given these circumstances, a comprehensive analysis of migrant smuggling as a form of transnational organized crime is necessary, particularly within the framework of criminal law and law enforcement policy. This analysis is crucial for assessing the extent to which existing legal approaches can address the cross-border and organized nature of this crime and for formulating countermeasures that are not only repressive but also oriented toward the protection of human rights and effective international cooperation. The following research questions will be examined based on the topics and titles outlined above:

1. How does migrant smuggling, as a form of transnational organized crime, affect the fulfillment and protection of the human rights of smuggled migrants?
2. How does law enforcement practice regarding the criminal offense of migrant smuggling affect the protection of migrants' human rights, particularly regarding the rights to liberty, personal safety, and legal protection?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Migrant Smuggling

In accordance with Article 1, paragraph (2), point 32 of Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration, human smuggling is defined as an act committed with the intent to obtain direct or indirect financial gain for oneself or for others. This may involve the transportation of individuals or groups, whether organized or unorganized, without valid permission to enter or exit Indonesian territory or foreign countries, regardless of whether they enter with valid or forged documents or without valid travel documents, whether through immigration channels or not ([Saputra, Harahap, & Triana, 2024](#)). "Smuggling" is defined as "the attempt to obtain, directly or indirectly, financial or other material gain from the illegal entry of a person into a country of which that person is not a national or permanent resident" by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) ([Arindrayani & Anabarja, 2024](#)). According to Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration, human smuggling is distinct from human trafficking, which is regulated by Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of Human Trafficking Crimes. The main difference between the two is that human smuggling involves payment to illegally enter another country's territory. Those involved are not citizens or permanent residents of the country

but rather foreign nationals seeking money or income solely for personal gain. Human trafficking is a crime aimed at exploiting its victims and often involves forced labor, prostitution and sexual exploitation ([Bustomi, 2023](#); [Waruwu, 2024](#)).

2.2 Overview of Transnational Organized Crime

The term “transnational” is used in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC). With the rise of transnational crime as a lucrative industry, it has long posed a major threat to the security and prosperity of societies worldwide. Transnational crime encompasses a wide range of illegal activities, some of which cross international borders, such as the illegal exploitation of people and natural resources, which threatens the existence of all forms of life on Earth ([Silvia, 2020](#)). The distribution of illegal products and services is just one aspect of organized crime; other aspects include petty theft, robbery, fraud, and predatory behavior. Because criminal groups know each other, mingle, collaborate, and even clash with other criminal groups, organized crime is also closely linked to criminal organizations ([Naseh, Ikhwanuddin, Ramadhani, Kusprabandaru, & Bathara, 2019](#)). According to Phil Williams, there are seven main causes for the rise in international organized crime. Seven elements contribute to this problem: globalization, international mobility, digital currency systems, high demand for illegally traded goods and services, high financial rewards for criminals, criminogenic factors, and asymmetry and variations in each country’s capacity to combat and respond to these illegal activities ([Natamiharja, Panjaitan, & Setiawan, 2025](#); [Tsabita, Laurencia, & Febriansyah, 2023](#)).

2.3 Definition of Human Rights

As human beings are God’s creations with complex needs related to reproduction and survival, it is essential to protect their human rights ([Sagala, 2018](#)). This right includes freedom from discrimination based on religion, race, gender, and socioeconomic status, which undermines human dignity ([Sari & Dompok, 2025](#)). Human rights are defined as “the fundamental rights inherent to human beings, which are universal and inalienable. Therefore, these rights must be protected, respected, and upheld, and must not be ignored, diminished, or revoked by anyone.” This means that human rights are a set of rights inherent to human beings as creations of the One and Only God and are a gift from God. The state, law, government, and every individual have an obligation to respect, uphold, and protect these rights to honor and safeguard human dignity. ([Hsb, 2023](#)). Ensuring that every individual is treated with respect and fairness requires prioritizing the defense and promotion of human rights. The importance of protecting human rights within the framework of domestic and international law is growing to guarantee the preservation of fundamental human rights. Several international human rights instruments have been ratified and incorporated into Indonesian law by this democratic and sovereign nation ([Harahap & Kholil, 2024](#); [Yelly, Syahrul, & Azahra, 2025](#)).

3. Methodology

Adopting a normative approach, this study seeks to define and examine the legal provisions governing the smuggling of migrants as an international organized crime and its impact on the protection of human rights. This study primarily focuses on examining national laws and international legal instruments and their standards. Laws related to immigration (Law No. 6 of 2011), human rights (Law No. 39 of 1999), and international treaties (UNTOC and the Protocol on the Smuggling of Migrants) constitute the primary legal sources, while scholarly articles, legal texts, and expert testimonies serve as secondary legal sources. This study examines the relationship between norms, law enforcement procedures, and the objective of safeguarding migrants’ rights to liberty, personal security, and legal protection through a systematic, comparative, and teleological perspective. This descriptive-analytical study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and practical components of law enforcement regarding migrant smuggling in Indonesia by employing methodologies such as statutory interpretation and content analysis of court decisions and related legal documents.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Migrant Smuggling as an Organized Transnational Crime Affects the Fulfillment and Protection of the Human Rights of Smuggled Migrants

In addition to its clear impact on the realization and protection of the human rights of smuggled migrants, organized transnational crime in the form of migrant smuggling also has far-reaching consequences in the ideological, economic, political, sociocultural, and national security spheres, and even in human trafficking ([Saragih, Sani, & Abu, 2021](#); [Sulaeman & Wasesa, 2023](#)). These conditions indicate that migrant smuggling is not merely a matter of immigration violations but also a serious crime that threatens human dignity and national stability, thus requiring a comprehensive response. The nature of this crime, which is driven by financial gain and carried out through structured networks, means that migrants are not treated as legal subjects with rights but rather as economic objects to be exploited. In practice, these conditions lead to violations of migrants' fundamental rights, such as the right to dignity, liberty, and security. Migrants often lose control over themselves and their journeys, leaving them in a highly vulnerable position for arbitrary treatment by smuggling networks.

Migrant smuggling is a global crime that puts people at risk of human rights violations in their countries of origin, transit, and eventual settlement. Smuggled migrants are often forced to travel along dangerous routes, such as conflict zones, open seas, or remote areas, using modes of transportation that do not meet safety and suitability standards. In such situations, they face serious threats of physical and psychological violence, exploitation, extortion, neglect, and even the risk of losing their lives in the process ([Hartati, 2013](#)). Based on fundamental human rights standards, these appalling travel conditions constitute a clear violation of the right to personal safety and the right to be free from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by migrants' undocumented status, which places them in a socially and legally vulnerable position, making them reluctant or unable to seek protection from state authorities for fear of arrest, detention, or deportation ([Siahaan, 2025](#)). Smuggling networks often exploit this fear to maintain control and silence victims, hindering broader efforts to uncover these crimes. In the context of complex transnational crimes involving multiple jurisdictions, countries face significant obstacles in fulfilling their commitments to protect human rights, while migrants remain trapped in a cycle of vulnerability.

Furthermore, migrant smuggling significantly hinders the fulfillment of migrants' social and economic rights. Because they are not part of the state's administrative and protection systems, smuggled migrants often have very limited access to basic services such as healthcare, education, decent work, and legal aid, which leads to extremely cramped living conditions. Their status as undocumented migrants places them in a situation of prolonged social exclusion, preventing their basic needs for a decent life from being met adequately. These conditions reflect the failure of human rights protection mechanisms to reach the most vulnerable migrant groups, while also highlighting the gap between legal norms guaranteeing social and economic rights and their actual implementation ([Riza & Lubis, 2025](#)). Instead, migrants face criminalization through the imposition of immigration sanctions or administrative detention for a certain period, without guarantees of a fair and transparent legal process. Such practices not only disregard the right to legal protection but also negate the right to equal treatment before the law and hinder migrants' opportunities for recovery and social integration. As a result, migrants are trapped in a cycle of ongoing structural vulnerability, while the goals of law enforcement to protect human dignity and comprehensively combat the crime of migrant smuggling become difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, efforts to combat migrant smuggling which tend to prioritize national security and sovereignty—also contribute to the lack of protection for migrants' human rights. Policies that focus primarily on border control and crackdowns on illegal migration often overlook that migrants are victims of organized crime ([Trajer, 2025](#)). Consequently, efforts to combat migrant smuggling have not been fully balanced by a human rights-based approach. This situation demonstrates that migrant smuggling, as a form of transnational organized crime, raises not only criminal law issues but also systemic implications for the fulfillment and protection of the human rights of smuggled migrants ([Xie & Baumer, 2021](#)).

4.2 Law Enforcement Practices Regarding the Criminal Offense of Migrant Smuggling Affect the Protection of Migrants' Human Rights, Particularly With Regard to the Rights to Liberty, Personal Safety, and Legal Protection

Authorities worldwide face a major obstacle in combating human trafficking: enforcing laws that prohibit the practice. Authorities struggle to detect and address human trafficking crimes because the networks are typically well organized and hidden. In addition, efforts to combat international human trafficking are hampered by a general lack of international cooperation ([Armilia & Ilmih, 2024](#)). Law enforcement practices regarding the criminal offense of migrant smuggling directly impact the level of protection of migrants' human rights, particularly the right to liberty, personal safety, and legal protection. In the context of national law, law enforcement tends to treat smuggled migrants as violators of immigration laws rather than as victims of organized transnational crime. Article 120 of Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration explicitly criminalizes migrant smuggling and designates perpetrators as the primary subjects of criminal liability. Without proper vulnerability assessment procedures, this misguided approach leads to immigration measures that restrict migrants' freedom, such as administrative detention and deportation. Consequently, these restrictions often fail to adequately address human rights issues and are frequently deemed disproportionate.

According to security experts, inhumane working conditions, including long working hours without breaks, psychological and physical abuse, insufficient wages or no wages at all, and a lack of access to health care, are common among undocumented migrant workers. Such abuse constitutes a serious violation of human rights and often occurs because migrant workers who enter a country illegally lack adequate legal protection in the host country. ([Intan, Harmain, & Kaloko, 2025](#)). This contradicts the state's stance on the seriousness of migrant smuggling, as set forth in Article 120(1) of No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration, which imposes a minimum prison sentence of five (5) years and a maximum of 15 (fifteen) years, as well as a minimum fine of Rp 500,000,000.00 and a maximum of Rp 1,500,000,000.00. However, smuggling networks may use the police's harsh stance toward migrants as a weapon to maintain control over their victims.

The realization of the right to legal protection for smuggled migrants is also directly influenced by how law enforcement officials carry out their duties. They are considered illegal immigrants because of their status as undocumented workers in the United States. Since law enforcement officials view them no differently from other criminals, the stigma of being illegal immigrants makes them highly vulnerable to rights violations or even revocation of their rights ([Eddyono, 2021](#)). In practice, the handling of cases has focused more on proving administrative violations in the field of immigration, such as entering or residing in the country without official documents, rather than on substantive efforts to investigate and dismantle migrant smuggling networks. Article 120(2) of Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration explicitly provides for harsher criminal penalties if such acts are committed in an organized manner or involve corporations. As a result of this overly narrow focus, migrants' roles as both victims and strategic witnesses in the investigation of organized transnational crime are often sidelined. Migrants are more often treated as targets of legal action rather than as legal subjects with rights and interests that must be protected. This situation results in migrants being denied meaningful access to participate in the judicial process, whether by providing testimony, receiving witness protection, or seeking redress for violated rights. Ultimately, these practices undermine the application of the principles of due process of law and equality before the law and have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of law enforcement in efforts to eradicate migrant smuggling comprehensively and justly.

Weak coordination among law enforcement agencies, coupled with limited cross-border cooperation, hinders the optimal protection of migrants' human rights. A fragmented law enforcement approach that is overly focused on national interests is inconsistent with the nature of migrant smuggling as an organized transnational crime. As a result, enforcement efforts tend to target low-level perpetrators and the smuggled migrants themselves, while the masterminds and criminal networks remain difficult to uncover, even though the legal framework has established severe criminal penalties. This situation reflects that law enforcement practices that are not yet fully oriented toward human rights principles result in weak guarantees of the right to liberty, personal security, and legal protection for migrants. To achieve the objectives of criminalization outlined in Article 120 of the Immigration Law while also

addressing the concerns of law enforcement and national security officials, a change is needed in how law enforcement treats migrants. This change must recognize migrants as victims of crime and as individuals entitled to legal protection from such crimes.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

Migrant smuggling, as a form of transnational organized crime, has serious implications for the fulfillment and protection of human rights, as migrants are treated as objects of economic exploitation rather than as legal subjects; consequently, their rights to human dignity, freedom, personal safety, and legal protection are often neglected. Law enforcement practices that remain focused on immigration control and national security tend to criminalize migrants as law-breakers, leading to disproportionate administrative detention, inhumane detention conditions, and limited access to legal aid and fair judicial proceedings. However, the lack of action against major human smuggling networks indicates that a purely repressive approach has not been effective, either in combating the crime of migrant smuggling or in ensuring optimal protection of migrants' human rights.

5.2 Research Limitations

Among its many shortcomings, this study fails to provide a description of actual law enforcement practices or the real-world circumstances in which migrants' human rights are upheld on the ground, as it is based on normative legal analysis that emphasizes legal scrutiny and international legal instruments. Furthermore, this study does not employ a comparative law approach with the legal systems of other countries, which limits the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies addressing migrant smuggling in Indonesia. Limitations in secondary data, such as court rulings and official reports from relevant agencies, also mean that the analysis of the implementation of Article 120 of Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration remains conceptual and does not yet fully measure the level of protection of the rights to liberty, personal safety, and legal protection for smuggled migrants.

5.3 Suggestions and Direction for Future Research

It is recommended that law enforcement regarding the criminal offense of migrant smuggling be carried out through a paradigm shift from a purely repressive approach to a human rights-based approach, recognizing migrants as both victims of organized transnational crime and subjects of legal protection. The government and law enforcement agencies must strengthen victim protection mechanisms through the implementation of vulnerability assessments, restrictions on the use of administrative detention, the provision of adequate and humane detention facilities, and ensuring access to legal aid and information regarding migrants' rights. In addition, improved coordination among law enforcement agencies and strengthened international cooperation are essential to uncover and take action against the key networks and masterminds behind migrant smuggling. To create more effective policies for the protection of human rights, immigration policies must be refined to align with ratified international human rights treaties, and empirical studies must be conducted on how law enforcement officials implement them.

Given the limitations of this research, further studies are recommended that employ a sociological-empirical approach through interviews and observations of law enforcement officials, immigration officers, international organizations, and migrants who are victims of smuggling to obtain a factual picture of law enforcement practices and the protection of human rights. In addition, comparative legal research with other countries that implement a victim-centered and human rights-based approach, as well as studies on the effectiveness of non-criminal policies such as international cooperation and the role of civil society, need to be developed to complement the criminal law approach and formulate a more comprehensive and just model for combating migrant smuggling.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express his deepest gratitude from the bottom of his heart to everyone who helped initiate and successfully carry out this research. The authors greatly benefited from their assistance, collaboration, and support. His education at the University of Lampung was greatly aided by the faculty and staff, and he is deeply grateful to all of them. In addition, the author would like to

express his gratitude to everyone who contributed to the success of this research by providing necessary data, information, and references. The author would also like to thank his colleagues and everyone else who provided motivation, inspiration, and support throughout the course of this research. He acknowledges that this research was made possible only through the help and generosity of all these people.

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