



LOSS PREVENTION DATA ANALYSIS

MANAGING ILLICIT MARITIME RISKS
DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

INTRODUCTION

Commercial vessels operate within complex international supply chains where varying security standards, enforcement practices, and oversight create opportunities for illicit activity.

Among the most persistent and operationally disruptive of these threats are stowaways and maritime drug smuggling, both of which can expose shipowners and crews to significant security, legal, financial, and humanitarian risk.

Although driven by different motivations, both stowaway incidents and drug smuggling operations exploit vulnerabilities during port and cargo operations, inconsistent application of international security standards, and the disproportionate exposure of seafarers to operational and legal consequences.

Prepared in collaboration with Africa Risk Compliance Limited (ARC), this Loss Prevention report draws on ARC's intelligence, incident data, and operational experience to examine where the principal risks are concentrated, how these activities occur, and what Members should be alert to when trading in higher-risk regions.

DRUG SMUGGLING IN MARITIME TRADE

UNDERSTANDING MARITIME DRUG SMUGGLING

For shipowners and operators, drug smuggling represents one of the most persistent and complex illicit threats facing the maritime sector.

Unlike opportunistic crimes, modern trafficking operations are highly organised and continuously adapt to exploit vulnerabilities in global supply chains. Smugglers take advantage of predictable shipping schedules, inconsistent port security standards, and the sheer volume of containerised cargo to move increasingly large consignments undetected. In many regions, transnational criminal networks leverage

corruption, sophisticated concealment methods, and well-established routes between South America and Europe to facilitate these activities. Recent trends show a shift toward fewer but significantly larger shipments, underscoring the strategic evolution of trafficking groups and the growing operational, legal, and financial risks that fall on vessel operators when illicit cargo is discovered on board.

DRUG SMUGGLING INCIDENT DATA NOVEMBER 2024 – DECEMBER 2025

Between November 2024 and December 2025, 301 drug smuggling incidents involving approximately 718 tonnes of cocaine were reported on board merchant vessels. This represents a reduction in the number of incidents compared to the previous year (331 incidents involving 249 tonnes of cocaine), but a significant increase in total volume seized, potentially indicating a shift towards fewer but larger consignments.

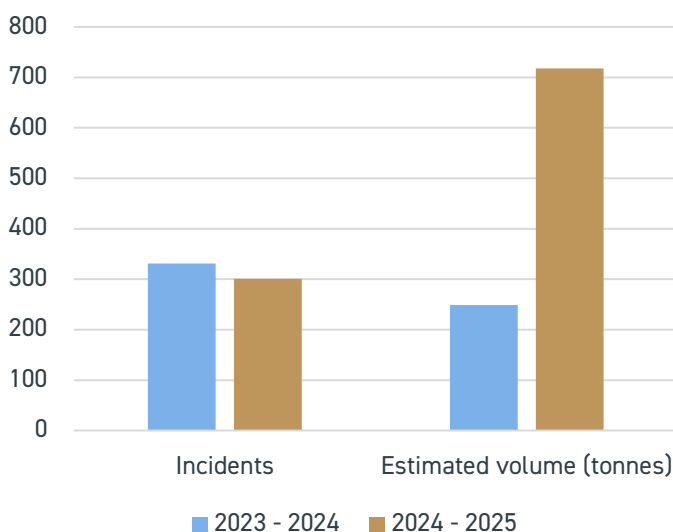


FIGURE 1 Drug Smuggling: Year-on-Year Comparison

DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

KEY INSIGHTS – DRUG SMUGGLING

1. SMUGGLING METHODS

- The “rip-on/rip-off” method - where smugglers secretly add drugs to a sealed container at the port and remove them at the destination without the shipper or crew knowing - accounts for about 67% of all reported cases, making containerised cargo the primary smuggling route.
- Drugs have been discovered across a wide range of vessel types, hidden in areas such as refrigeration units, ventilation systems, false panels, and even attached to hulls below the waterline

2. GEOGRAPHIC PATTERNS AND ROUTES

- Brazil remained the leading country of embarkation (nearly 24% of cases), followed by Ecuador (nearly 22%).
- High-risk ports included Guayaquil, Paranaguá, Santos, Posorja, and Itapoà.
- The most common destination countries were Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and Australia, with Antwerp the most frequent destination port.
- Emerging routes included Panama–New Zealand, Ecuador–Germany, and Ecuador–Greece, indicating continued diversification.

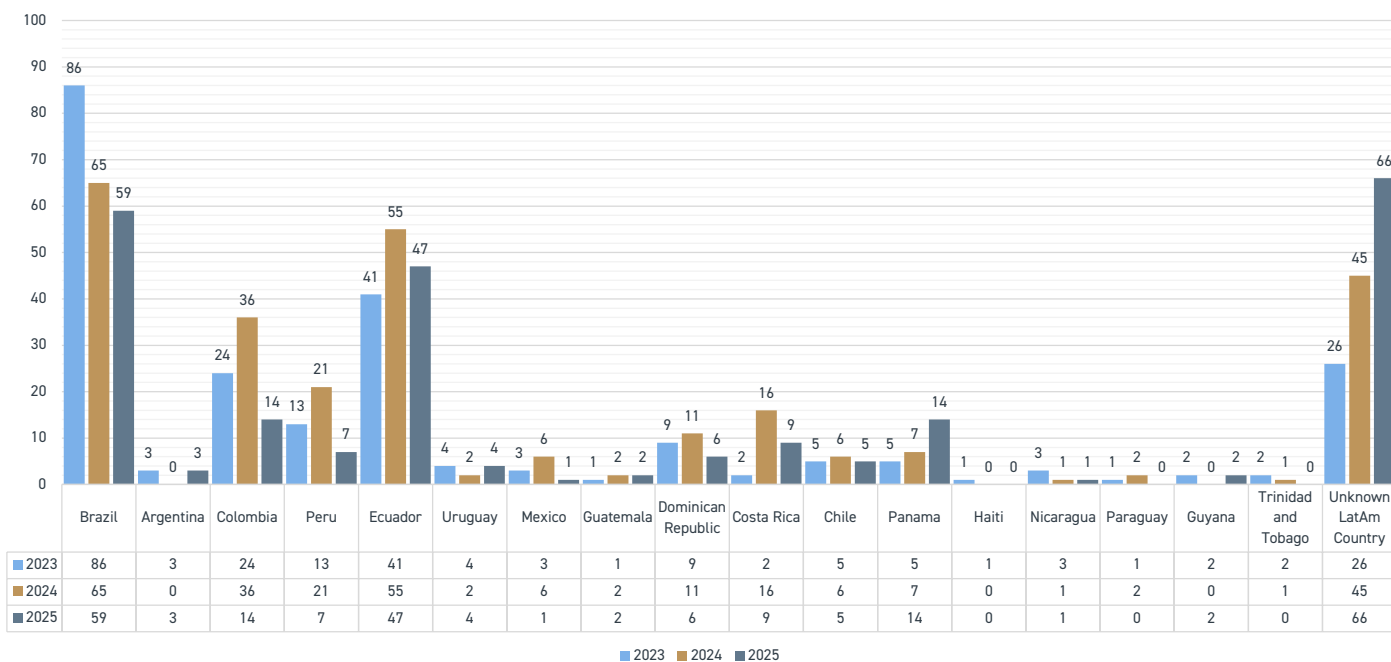


FIGURE 2 Drug Smuggling: Country of Embarkation Year-on-Year Comparison

DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

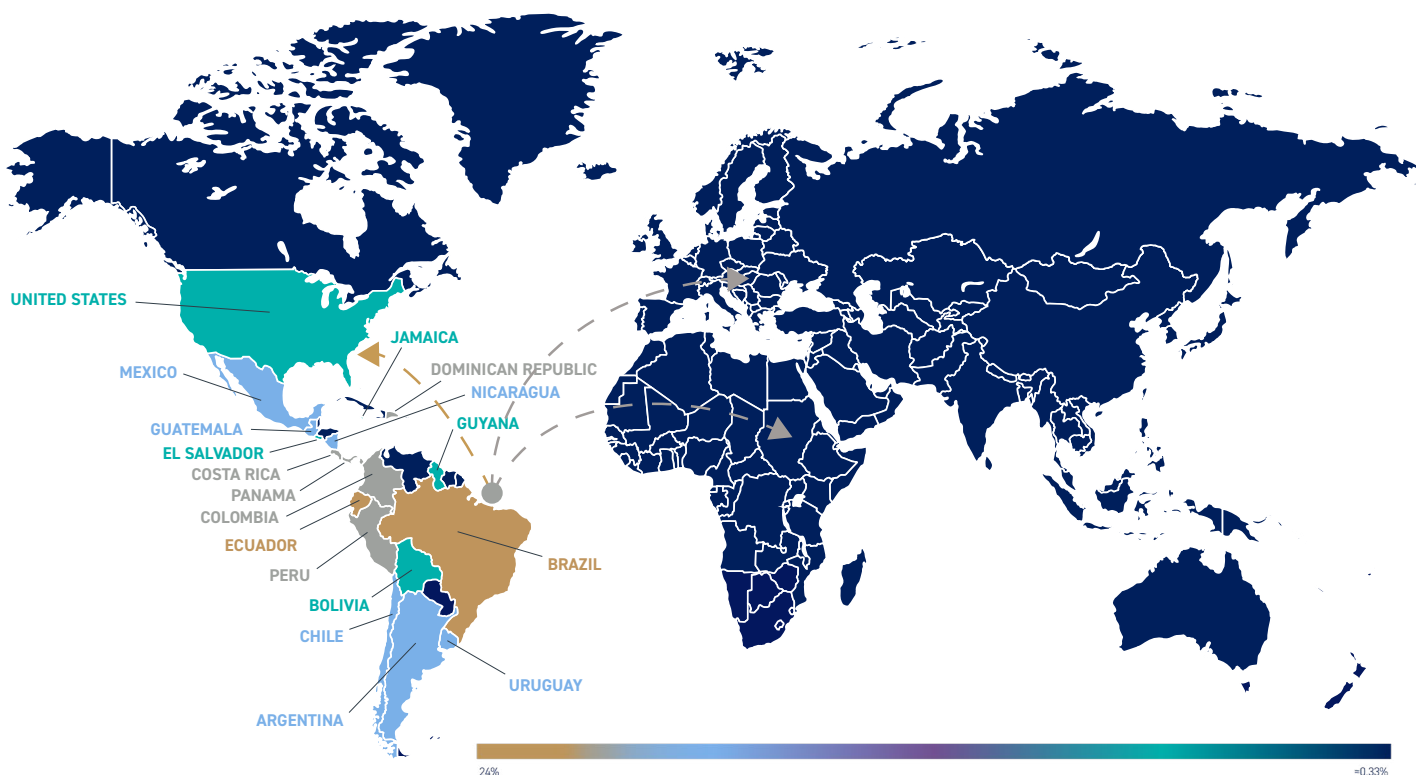


FIGURE 3 Drugs smuggling route map - indicates continued reliance on established South America–Europe routes, alongside diversification into emerging corridors

3. CARGO COMMODITIES

- Bananas were the most frequently used commodity for concealment, consistent with Ecuador's export profile.

- Increased exposure on services calling at Northern European hub ports
- Continued targeting of containerships due to predictability and cargo volume

What Members should be alert to:

- Heightened risk on banana trades from Ecuador and Brazil



DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

TYPES OF VESSELS AFFECTED

Based on reported incidents, the distribution of vessel types involved in drug smuggling cases was as follows:

VESSEL TYPE	NUMBERS REPORTED IN 2024/25
Containership	211
Bulk Carrier	13
Cruise Ship	0
Tanker	2
General Cargo	0
Roll-on/Roll-off	2
Ro-Ro/Cargo	3
Reefer	2
Livestock	2
Fishing	0
Unknown	8

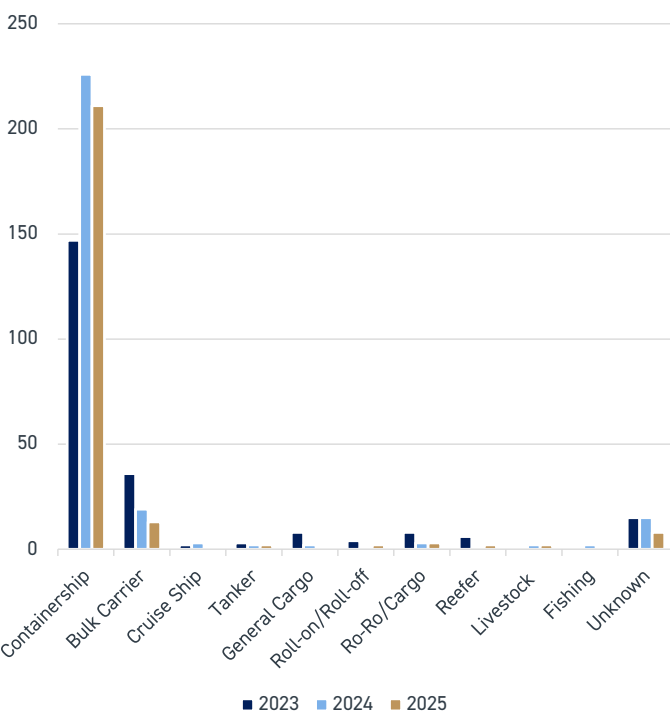
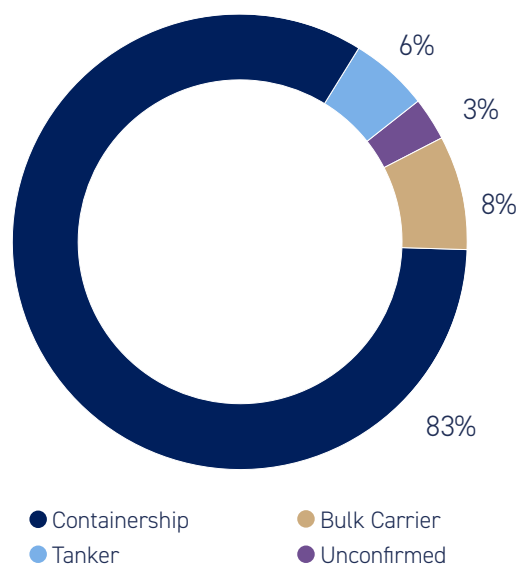


FIGURE 4 Types of Vessels Affected in Drug Smuggling Cases 2024 / 25

TYPE OF VESSELS AFFECTED FOR DRUG SMUGGLING AT TOP 3 PORTS

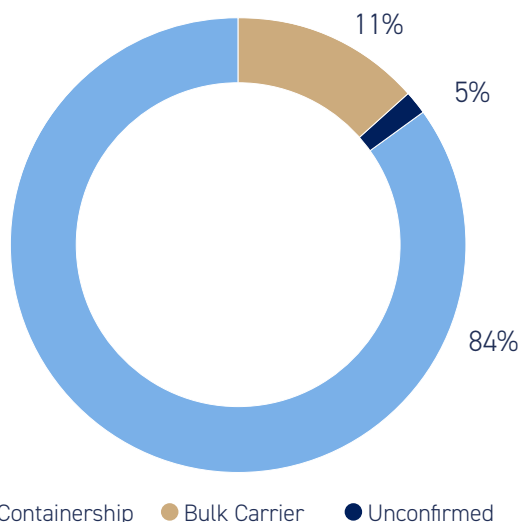
GUAYAQUIL, ECUADOR

VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carrier	8%
Containership	83%
Tanker	6%
Unconfirmed	3%



PARANAGUÁ, BRAZIL

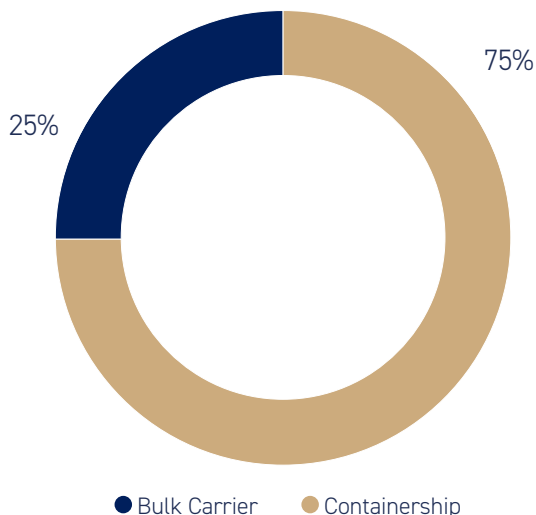
VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carrier	11%
Containership	84%
Unconfirmed	5%



DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

SANTOS, BRAZIL

VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carrier	25%
Containership	75%



COMMON CONCEALMENT METHODS BY SHIP TYPE (TOP PORTS)

Based on reported drug-smuggling incidents across the top ports (Guayaquil, Paranaguá, Santos), the most common concealment methods for each major ship type are:

CONTAINERSHIPS

Containerships remain the most frequently targeted vessel type at the top ports, and the concealment methods are typically associated with containerised cargo:

- Rip-on/Rip-off concealment – drugs placed inside containers among legitimate cargo during port calls, then removed at the destination.
- Concealment inside container structures, including:
 - Refrigeration unit (reefer) cooling systems
 - Ventilation ducts
 - Container walls
 - False panels, false floors, or false bottoms
- Concealment within cargo loads (especially high risk commodities such as bananas).

BULK CARRIERS

Bulk carriers are less frequently targeted than

containerships, but methods differ significantly:

- Underwater concealment using divers, most commonly inside the sea chest.
- Onboard concealment within:
 - Internal compartments
 - Engine room spaces
 - Void spaces or access trunks
- Concealment within bulk cargo (less common but noted in some cases depending on commodity).

TANKERS

Tanker concealment methods mirror bulk carrier techniques:

- Onboard concealment in machinery spaces such as the engine room or auxiliary compartments.
- Underwater concealment (sea chest) in rare cases, depending on port security conditions.

ROLL-ON/ROLL-OFF (RO-RO) VESSELS

Ro-Ro vessels present several concealment opportunities:

- Onboard concealment in internal compartments, machinery spaces, or behind panels.
- Inside vehicles or rolling cargo in the case of car carriers.
- Occasional use of divers for underwater attachment (less common than on bulk carriers or reefers).

REEFER SHIPS

Reefer ships show a mix of container-type and underwater methods:

- Underwater concealment, primarily in the sea chest.
- Rip-on/Rip-off concealment where cargo-handling processes mirror container operations.
- Concealment inside refrigeration components (e.g., cooling ducts or false spaces around insulated cargo holds).

LIVESTOCK CARRIERS

Livestock carriers are occasionally targeted due to predictable routes and structural complexity:

- Underwater concealment via sea chest using divers.
- Onboard concealment within livestock compartments or adjacent machinery spaces (less frequently reported but possible).

DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

STOWAWAYS IN COMMERCIAL SHIPPING

UNDERSTANDING MARITIME STOWAWAYS

For the global shipping industry, few events are as disruptive and unpredictable as the discovery of stowaways on board a vessel.

The phenomenon is as old as seafaring itself. In many cases, economic hardship, unemployment, and limited access to basic services drive individuals to take extreme personal risks. In more serious cases, political instability, armed conflict, or persecution compel individuals to attempt irregular migration by sea.

STOWAWAY INCIDENT DATA NOVEMBER 2024 – DECEMBER 2025

Between November 2024 and December 2025, 77 stowaway incidents involving 321 individuals were recorded on board merchant vessels worldwide. This represents a reduction in the number of incidents compared to the previous year, when 81 incidents involving 241 stowaways were reported.

Despite the reduction in incident numbers, the average number of stowaways per incident increased, indicating a shift towards larger group embarkations rather than isolated cases.

As with previous reporting periods, stowaway incidents are often managed discreetly, particularly where asylum or humanitarian considerations apply. The figures therefore provide an indicative overview of trends, rather than a complete global record.

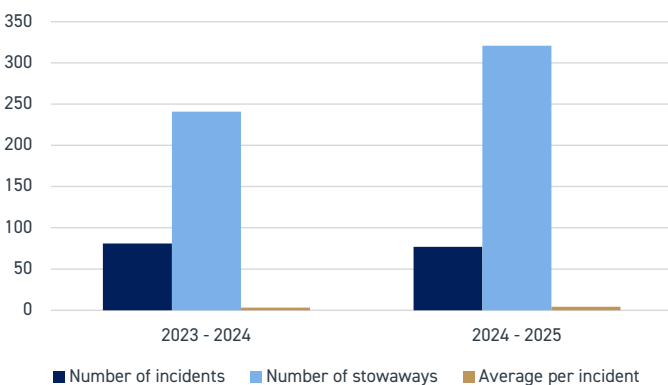


FIGURE 5 Stowaway Incidents - Year-on-Year Comparison

While the number of reported stowaway incidents declined, the average number of stowaways per incident increased, indicating a shift towards larger group embarkations.

KEY INSIGHTS - STOWAWAYS

1. GEOGRAPHIC RISK PROFILE

- The Gulf of Guinea remains the highest-risk region globally, with Nigeria accounting for more than 40% of reported stowaway cases.
- South Africa, previously considered a high-risk embarkation area, recorded no reported incidents during this period, suggesting either improved controls or displacement of risk.
- Stowaway cases were recorded in non-traditional locations, including Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Germany, demonstrating that stowaway risk is no longer confined to historically high-risk regions.

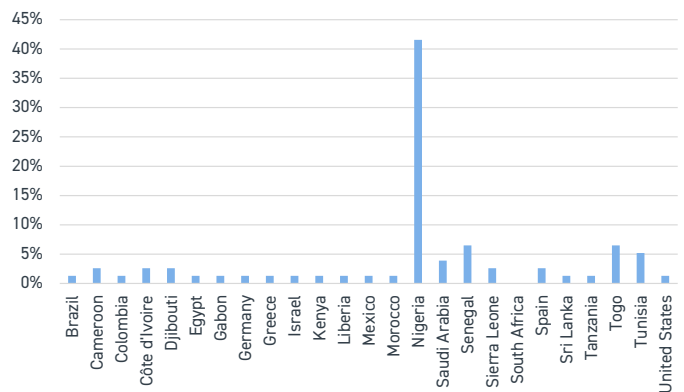


FIGURE 6 Countries of Embarkation 2024/2025

2. METHODS OF BOARDING AND CONCEALMENT

- The rudder remains the most common hiding location, reflecting continued boarding from the water in high-risk ports.
- Other frequently identified hiding locations include empty containers, cargo holds, chain lockers, and concealed spaces behind false panels.

HIDING LOCATION	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PRACTICAL IMPLICATION
Rudder	Very high	Boarding from the water; difficult to detect without targeted checks
Empty containers	High	Requires container integrity and seal checks

DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

HIDING LOCATION	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PRACTICAL IMPLICATION
Cargo holds	Moderate	Post-loading searches critical
Chain lockers	Moderate	Often overlooked enclosed spaces
False panels/ concealed spaces	Moderate	Requires detailed inspection

The rudder remains the most frequently identified stowaway hiding location, highlighting continued boarding from the water in higher-risk ports.

3. GROUP SIZE AND RISK ESCALATION

- Nearly half of all incidents involved more than two stowaways, indicating a trend towards coordinated group embarkations.
- The largest single case involved 49 stowaways on one vessel, significantly increasing safety, welfare, and security risks for crew.

What Members should be alert to:

- Larger groups increase the likelihood of crew intimidation, fatigue, and resource strain
- Early detection is critical to reduce prolonged onboard supervision and deviation costs

TYPES OF VESSELS AFFECTED

Based on information supplied by ARC, the distribution of stowaway incidents by vessel type was as follows:

VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carriers	32%
Containerships	26%
Tankers	9%
General Dry Cargo	7%
Car Carriers	4%
Ro-Ro	4%
Reefer	1%
Tug	3%
Unconfirmed	14%

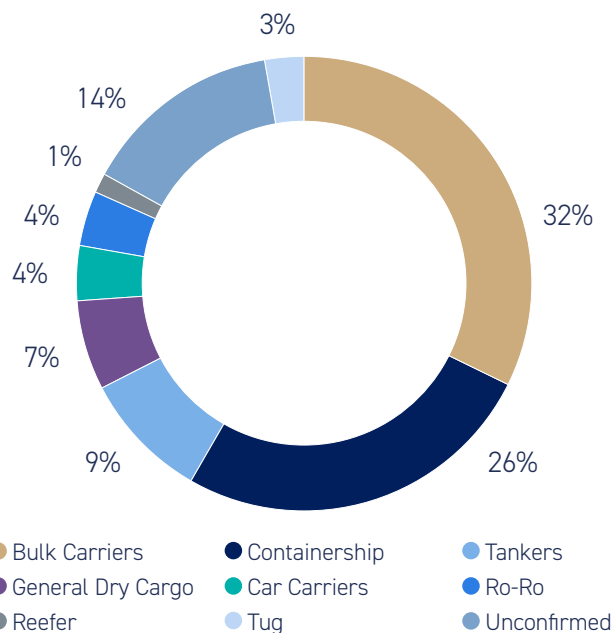
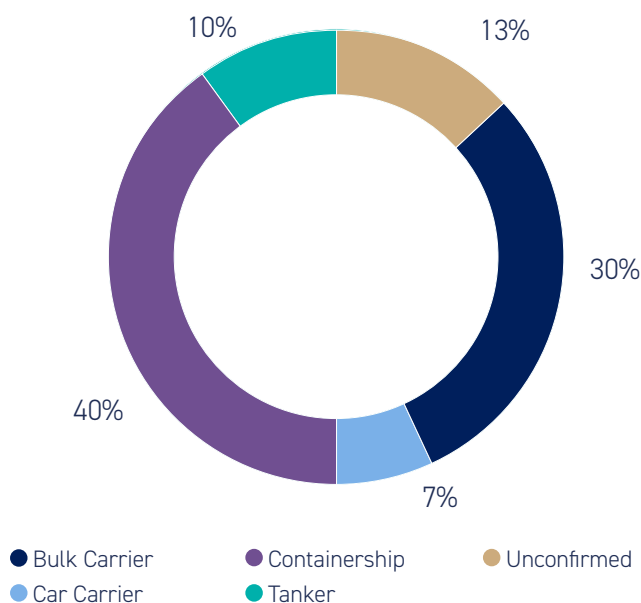


FIGURE 7 Types of Vessels Affected in Stowaway Cases 2024/25

TYPE OF VESSELS AFFECTED FOR STOWAWAYS AT TOP 3 PORTS

LAGOS, NIGERIA

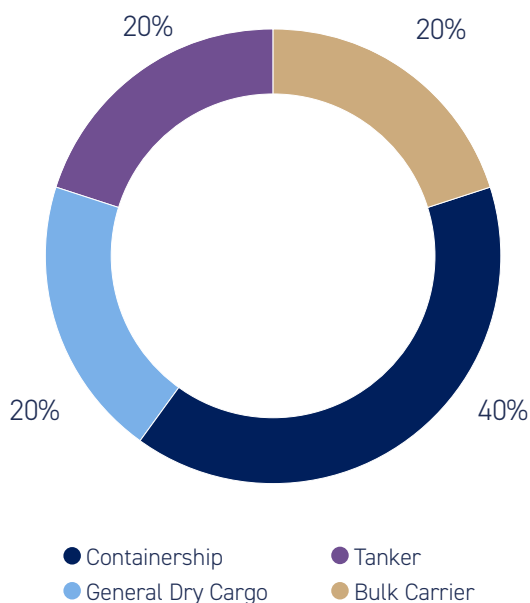
VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carrier	30%
Car Carrier	7%
Containership	40%
Tanker	10%
Unconfirmed	13%



DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

LOMÉ, TOGO

VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carrier	20%
Containership	40%
General Dry Cargo	20%
Tanker	20%



OPERATIONAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

While the operational and legal implications of stowaway incidents are well understood, the increasing size of stowaway groups heightens safety, welfare, and resource challenges for crews.

This reinforces the importance of prevention, early detection, and post-departure searches, particularly in higher-risk regions.

CONCLUSION

While overall incident numbers for both stowaways and drug smuggling have declined, risk concentration, group size, and shipment scale have increased.

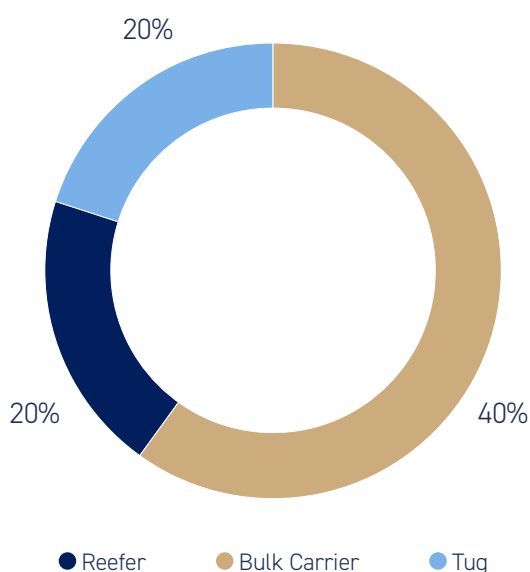
Members should remain alert to:

- Persistent high-risk regions (notably the Gulf of Guinea and South American export hubs)
- Emerging embarkation and destination locations
- Increasingly sophisticated concealment methods
- Larger group stowaway incidents and higher-volume drug consignments

Preventive measures, intelligence-led risk assessment, and vigilant port operations remain the most effective tools for mitigating these evolving risks.

DAKAR, SENEGAL

VESSEL TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Bulk Carrier	60%
Reefer	20%
Tug	20%



DRUG SMUGGLING & STOWAWAYS

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

The Club have published various articles for Members' reference.

- Britannia BSAFE – [Onboard Security](#)
- Britannia BSAFE – [Physical Security](#)
- [Drug Smuggling Prevention](#)
- [Drug Trafficking – An Ongoing Problem for Shipping](#)
- Stowaways – [Case Studies and Precautions to Take to Avoid Stowaways](#)

ABOUT ARC

ARC is a leader in maritime security, with decades of expertise and over 5,000 successful taskings in West Africa since 2016.

Their commitment to honesty, expertise, and reliability allows members to get straightforward advice and tailored, comprehensive solutions across Security, Maritime, and Support Services.

DATA COLLECTION BY ARC

ARC collects information through its extensive network and various sources, utilising Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), such as publicly available news reports, direct information from shipping companies, and data published in publicly accessible law enforcement, government, and academic reports.



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