

# *Hemisphere*

A MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAS

VOLUME 29 • SUMMER 2020 • LACC.FIU.EDU

## Migrations: The Hardships of Hope

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# Hemisphere

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COVER IMAGE and Page 5: A migrant family runs over the border from Tijuana, Mexico, hoping for a better life in the US. The border post is the busiest in the country for illegal and legal immigration from Mexico and Central America. PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON/Getty Images.

## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear *Hemisphere* readers:

In recent years, the structural drivers and human stories of mass migration from Central America and Venezuela have been the subject of much discussion in academic, policy and media circles. The tragedy of nearly two million Venezuelans leaving their homeland during a humanitarian crisis and scenes of Central American women and children fleeing the crime and violence of their countries on a long and dangerous journey to reach the United States have captured the attention of the world. In fact, however, migration has long been part of the political, social and humanitarian landscape of the Americas. Hemisphere has delved into this critical issue from different perspectives, always examining the problem beyond the high-profile cases covered by the media. In this issue, guest editor Luis Guillermo Solis, former president of Costa Rica and incoming interim director of LACC, has convened a multidisciplinary group of scholars to examine a range of topics that may not attract wide public attention but are significant to individuals and societies that find themselves poor and disenfranchised by conditions outside of their control. I am grateful to President Solis and the contributors for their work in rescuing these important accounts.

I would also like to thank the many people who have made my seven years as director of LACC such a productive and gratifying experience. FIU President Mark B. Rosenberg, Provost Ken Furton and the university's senior leadership understood our ambitious goals and gave us their unfailing support. A few years ago, we were designated by the Provost as an Emerging Preeminent Program. Important resources have accompanied this designation, allowing us to make strategic investments such as faculty cluster hires to help build the Brazil Studies Institute. Dean John Stack was a stalwart of support; I will be forever grateful for all that he did for me professionally and for ensuring that LACC remained one of the top Latin American and Caribbean Centers in the United States. Dean Stack's support is one of the key reasons why LACC, in the last two cycles, was funded and designated by the U.S. Department of Education as a National Resource Center for Latin America.

Finally, I'd like to thank the wonderful team at LACC. Associate Director Liesl Picard's professionalism, leadership and dedication to our missions and goals is the reason LACC is among the top centers. It has been a pleasure to see the growth of our research agenda under the leadership of the indefatigable Dr. José Miguel Cruz. I am grateful to Rossie Montenegro for ensuring that I stayed out of trouble and for making sure, along with the rest of the LACC team – Joseph Holbrook, Viroselie Caviedes, Lindsay Dudley, Madelyn Tirado, Dr. María Luisa Veisaga, Marielena Armstrong and FIU's extraordinary faculty and students – that LACC remain an extraordinary place to work and study.

Frank O. Mora  
Director & Professor  
Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center  
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# FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

For decades, Hemisphere has been a source of relevant information for anyone interested in Latin American and Caribbean affairs. Through the years, this emblematic publication of the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center has provided a fresh, solid and sometimes daring perspective on the region. The present issue contributes to this scholarly tradition by analyzing one of the most pressing and complex humanitarian and geopolitical phenomena confronting the Americas today: migration.

Migration has been a permanent reality for countries and regions around the world for thousands of years. The result of war, pandemics, natural disasters, internal conflicts, economic deprivation, hunger and the legitimate desire of people to seek a better future for themselves and their families, migration occurs when human populations are forced to endure unacceptable living conditions.

In ordinary times, most people prefer to dwell in familiar surroundings. Even when facing significant survival challenges, social groups do not easily abandon their national or regional contexts to risk the perils that migration implies. The uncertainties they face when arriving at their destination and the terrible circumstances in which they may be forced to live are additional disincentives for leaving home and family behind. Even then, however, people migrate. In recent years, they have done so by the millions, with especially significant flows coming from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, Haiti, the Andean region and Central America's "Northern Triangle."

The numbers are testimony of the dire conditions that pervade the economies and political systems of many nations in this hemisphere. It is also a reminder of the vital need for international solidarity in dealing with the massive displacement of vulnerable populations and putting an end to one of its most perverse yet profitable expressions: human trafficking. This is particularly true for the United States, the preferred destination for many migrants, especially those from this hemisphere. Other countries too, however – Colombia, Costa Rica, Peru, Chile and Argentina – have become home to millions seeking refuge from oppression, insecurity, hunger and the ravaging effects of unemployment, corruption and climate change.

This issue of Hemisphere analyzes some of the most salient cases of migration in the Americas. In addition to probing the causes of population movements, it provides elements to better understand their impact in volatile environments further exacerbated by the still unknown long-term effects of COVID-19. I hope that through this exercise, our readers will be able to better understand this continental phenomenon and fathom its enduring significance for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In closing, I would like to thank Frank Mora for his leadership during the last seven years as director of LACC and the many contributions he made during his tenure. Frank brought LACC to new heights, ratifying its standing as one of the most distinguished regional studies programs in the United States. We wish him much success!

Luis G. Solís  
Visiting Distinguished Professor of Latin American Studies  
Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center  
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# New Forms of Political Banishment: Central American Migration as Political Response

by José Miguel Cruz

*Desahuciado está el que tiene que marchar  
a vivir una cultura diferente.*  
León Gieco

## The Story of Diana

In early 2019, Diana, a 32-year-old woman living in a town in central Honduras, was forced to leave the country abruptly. She fled with her partner and four children after she was gang-raped and her partner badly beaten by the local clique of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). Diana owned a small but thriving roadside shop. Business activity started to decline, however, when the country was paralyzed due to recurrent demonstrations against the government. Hondurans had taken to the streets to protest the decision to privatize the public health system and the alleged electoral fraud that secured a new presidential term for President Juan Orlando Hernández.

The gang had been extorting Diana and her partner for several months, demanding monthly protection payments. When retail sales dropped in the shop, Diana turned to a loan shark for cash. As business continued to deteriorate, she defaulted on a payment to MS-13. In response, gang members assaulted her partner and took his motorcycle, warning the couple not to default again. Then, distressed by the deteriorating economic situation, Diana did something that would be normal procedure

in a society with functioning law enforcement institutions: She reported the assault and extortion scheme to the police. What happened next reveals the broken state of the Honduran establishment: The police leaked the report to MS-13, and that same night, the gang came to Diana's house. After assaulting her and her partner, they evicted the family from their own home.

Leaving with the few things they could gather that night, the family joined one of the migrant caravans headed to the United States. During the strenuous journey, they were repeatedly assaulted and abused by criminals and the authorities alike in Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. Diana developed a medical condition that forced them to pause their journey and seek medical assistance in Mexico City, where she underwent surgery.

Recounting this harrowing experience months later in a migrant refugee center in Mexico, Diana was upset by her gullibility in trusting the Honduran police. She felt betrayed by the authorities that were supposed to protect civilians. Ultimately, it was the corruption and ineffectiveness of the country's institutions that pushed the

family out of the country. In her retelling of the experience, Diana acknowledged that she used to deride people who migrated north. She thought then that her country, despite its chronic problems, provided opportunities to everyone who wanted to work and could navigate insecurity. Her experience was a painful lesson that put an end to this illusion.

This article addresses the problematic of "unconventional" outmigration from Central America. The phenomenon grabbed the world's attention in 2018, when thousands of Central American citizens, mainly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, banded together in large groups to travel in caravans through Mexico toward the United States. Central Americans, however, have been leaving their homelands in large numbers for several decades. While the immediate causes of emigration have shifted across time, they reflect structural problems of poverty and inequality. These issues have prevailed in the region for years, aggravated by chronic political instability and autocratic regimes that, in turn, contribute to fuel the diaspora. The recent surge in Central American emigration can be viewed as a result of the failure of

local political systems to respond to the needs of vulnerable populations while perpetuating inequity and impunity.

The focus of this article is the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America, a subregion comprised of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador and the origin of the recent migrant caravans to the United States. The main source of evidence is a pilot study conducted by Florida International University's Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) of nearly 120 Central American migrants who left their countries in 2019 to travel to the United States and Mexico. Two-thirds of the respondents were citizens of Honduras, while the rest came from El Salvador and Guatemala. The sample included very few Nicaraguans. Participants were interviewed in migrant and refugee centers in the Mexican cities of Tapachula, Toluca and Mexico City in August 2019.

## A staggering surge in migration

Diana's case is a representative example of the ordeals suffered by many of the Central Americans who have flocked to the US-Mexican border in recent years. According to data from the Migration Policy Institute, in fiscal year 2018 the US Customs and Border Patrol apprehended more than 38,000 unaccompanied children and nearly 104,000 people traveling in family groups from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Those numbers tripled the following year. During the first nine months of fiscal year 2019, the border patrol stopped more than 350,000 migrants traveling in family groups from the Northern Triangle. According to the LACC pilot study, nearly 46% of respondents cited security reasons, including threats



*A Honduran child and her mother, fleeing poverty and violence in their home country, wait along the border bridge after being denied entry from Mexico into the U.S. on June 25, 2018 in Brownsville, Texas. More than 2,300 immigrant children were separated from their parents due to the Trump Administration's zero-tolerance policy for border crossers, which has since been reversed. SPENCER PLATT/Getty Images*

or attacks by criminal groups, as their main reason for leaving their countries. A significant portion of the interviewees, 28.5% – most of them from the Northern Triangle, ranging in age from 18 to 72 – also pointed to lack of opportunity, unemployment, poverty and food insecurity.

As noted earlier, Central American migration to the United States is not a new phenomenon. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that in 2017, more than 3.5 million Central America immigrants lived in the United States. Salvadorans and Guatemalans constituted the largest groups: 1.4 million and nearly one million, respectively. Some migrated to the United States during the civil wars and political conflicts that ravaged the region during the 1980s, but in the decades that followed, as the political instability subsided, a new type of crisis emerged. Central

American countries, especially those in the Northern Triangle, struggled to generate sustainable economic growth. Honduras, which did not experience civil war in the 1980s, was especially hard hit by a combination of weak and exclusionary economic performance and natural disasters. According to a study published in *The Latin Americanist*, the number of Honduran immigrants in the United States swelled from 109,000 in 1990 to nearly 300,000 in 2000, approaching half a million in 2009. The numbers surged even more in 2014, when a paper in the *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* reported that apprehensions of unaccompanied children had risen 77% from the previous year. Arrests of family groups went from 14,855 in 2013 to 68,445 in 2014, a 361% increase. The largest groups of immigrants were Hondurans and Salvadorans.



Although immigration from the Northern Triangle of Central America has experienced some cyclical trends since 2015, it has never stopped, and the overall numbers keep growing in comparison with immigrants from other Latin American regions. Furthermore, as the Pew Research Center has reported, most of the newcomers are undocumented immigrants.

*Permanent vital emergency*

Most explanations of the current migrant crisis originating in Central America focus on the recurring economic and security issues in the region. More than 40 years ago, Ignacio Martín-Baró, a social psychologist assassinated by the Salvadoran army, described most Central Americans as living in a permanent state of vital emergency. Social and economic conditions pushed them to a daily scramble for survival, a situation that many observers blamed for the devastating civil wars of the 1980s.

Today, impoverished Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans continue to flee from violence, financial hardship and lack of opportunity. The Northern Triangle nations remain poor, with per capita GDP below \$5,000, and are besieged by staggering levels of criminal violence. Street gangs and violent criminal organizations rule city neighborhoods, towns and vast rural areas. A 2015 study by the Salvadoran government concluded that nearly 500,000 of the country’s citizens were associated with gangs and criminal groups. Funded largely by extortion, these groups target mostly poor urban barrios, demanding a “security” fee from grocery stores, family businesses and small farmers. They also tax big companies by

charging monthly fees to allow their distributors and employees to circulate in gang-controlled territory. According to *InSight Crime*, a news outlet that reports on security and organized crime in the region, Salvadorans pay approximately \$400 million in extortion fees to such groups every year. Hondurans pay nearly \$200 million and Guatemalans, \$61 million.

Indicators of lethal violence are even worse. Over the last decade, according to the United Nations, the homicide rate in the Northern Triangle nations has surpassed 40 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2013-2015, it was closer to 100 per 100,000 in El Salvador and Honduras. In comparison, the average global homicide rate in 2017 was 6.1 per 100,000. In the 2010s, the murder rate in the Northern Triangle was consistently seven times higher than in the rest of the world.

On the economic front, structural reform and international cooperation programs have failed to create sustainable economic growth in any of the Northern Triangle countries. Efforts to revamp their economies after the “lost decade” of the 1980s have done little to alleviate the economic insecurity of a majority of Central American citizens. Although the economic reforms promoted by the Washington Consensus stabilized public finances and generated modest economic growth, they failed to increase the fiscal capacity of governments to respond to the demands of the population. Instead of ensuring wealth and economic stability for the majority of citizens, the massive privatization of state-owned companies left thousands of workers unemployed. Many skilled employees were forced to

migrate from the formal sector of the economy, where they paid taxes and had social security benefits, toward activities characterized by informality, job uncertainty and low wages. Substantial cuts in public expenditures slashed social programs in education, housing and healthcare that could have mitigated the harsh social conditions faced by underprivileged populations. Dispossessed Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans arrived at the new millennium without the human and social capital to overcome the natural disasters and recession of the late 2000s. According to different sources, by the mid-2000s, approximately half of the populations of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras remained below their national poverty lines. With those levels of poverty, as Diana’s case illustrates, any minor disruption on the economic front poses a direct threat to survival for many citizens.

*Political failure*

Chronic violence, unemployment and poverty are not the only issues pushing Central Americans out of their homelands. Behind the massive migrant caravans that disrupted the region in 2018 is a profound sense of political and social failure. Ninety-one percent of respondents in the LACC study said that the political systems of their countries did not protect their fundamental rights as citizens. Among Hondurans, the percentage was 96%.

Hondurans have accounted for most of the spikes in the migrant caravans from Central America. Like the other Northern Triangle nations, Honduras has been beset by social problems and natural disasters, but the critical dysfunctionality of its



*McAllen, Texas-September 21, 2016: A Border Patrol agent takes a group of Central Americans into custody for illegally crossing the Rio Grande into the U.S. A flood of mothers with children and unaccompanied minors from Central America fleeing gang violence began crossing illegally in 2016. VICHINTERLANG/iStock by Getty Images.*

political system has set it apart from its neighbors. Corrupt national leadership, weak institutions and a lack of accountability of the security forces have depleted national resources and thwarted efforts to establish the rule of law. These shortcomings were on full display in the events leading up to the 2009 coup d’état and they have continued to pervade society since then. In response, Hondurans have turned to the same solution their Guatemalan and Salvadoran neighbors have used for decades: emigration.

In the 1990s, the Northern Triangle countries became electoral democracies, reformed their criminal justice institutions and opened their economies in an attempt to boost development and prosperity. Political reforms sought to establish the appropriate institutions to strengthen the rule of law, guarantee human rights protections, and make political institutions more responsive to the demands and needs of the population. The recent surge of families and unaccompanied minors flooding the border has called into question the success of those reforms. The mass migration of Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans is linked to the

institutional failures that have curbed and sidetracked the societal transformations that were the goal of political liberalization.

The comprehensive political transitions of the 1990s are a critical feature of Central America’s recent history. Those transitions were marked by promising peace processes and institutional reforms that ended military dictatorships and bloody internal conflicts. They were supposed to pave the way for democratization. In Guatemala and El Salvador, elections and limited alternation of power started in the mid-1980s, but reforms aimed to guarantee human rights and the rule of law were not implemented until the 1990s as a direct result of political pacts and peace agreements between the national governments and leftist guerrillas. In Honduras, the military renounced control over the Executive Branch in the early 1980s but remained a dominant force in charge of the security apparatus through 1998, when this power was handed to civilians.

The fundamental goal of the peace processes was to curb the state’s power to tyrannize the population, a hallmark of Central American

political systems throughout history, especially in the Northern Triangle. Many citizens in Central America saw the political transitions as a historic opportunity to construct new societies, not merely as an arrangement between disaffected elites to end armed conflicts. In the mid-1990s, there was a generalized feeling in Central America that ending the wars and restoring—or establishing—democratic regimes offered an opportunity to rebuild the region, not only materially and economically, but also socially and culturally. Many Central Americans shared a sense of optimism about the future. In fact, the Salvadoran government has estimated that during the first 14 months following the end of the civil war, more than 300,000 Salvadorans living abroad returned home, eager to rebuild their lives in the country.

Almost from the start, however, holdovers and operators from the old regimes began eroding the new institutional framework. They found common cause in corrupt politicians, past human rights abusers, and economic elites interested in maintaining their privileges and impunity. The new regimes implemented the reforms



more in form than in substance. Very few military operators faced trials for past human rights abuses, while some joined the ranks of criminal organizations. Impunity served them well. Liberalization of electoral competition with weak accountability mechanisms allowed crooked politicians to run for office under the protection of economic elites. Once in power, they took advantage of the Washington Consensus reforms to hand over the most profitable state companies to their cronies and dismantle most regulatory and accountability institutions.

In the end, political reform failed to strengthen institutions, reduce impunity or curtail the exclusionary effects of economic policies. Many Salvadorans—followed by Guatemalans and Hondurans—turned their sights back to the north, to the United States. By the 2010s, Salvadorans constituted the second largest community of Latin American immigrants in the United States, after Mexicans.

Exit as political response

In the late 1970s, Albert O. Hirschman, a political economist who fled Nazi Germany in the years before the Second World War, advanced a theory to explain citizens’ responses to political dissatisfaction. He argued that a person dissatisfied with the way her country is governed has essentially two options to express her discontent. The first one is voice. Through electoral systems and periodic voting, citizens can express their opinions publicly with the expectation that electing a different ruler or political program will produce changes in the country. The second option is exit. The citizen may decide to leave the country and its political

system altogether if the expected changes do not occur and hope for reform is lost. Democratic political systems with functioning institutions provide plenty of space for voice. They generally respond to expectations for change or infuse people with hope that specific reforms and policies are possible. Other political systems, however, are more prone to push their people out because they convince their constituents that desirable improvements are unattainable. They end up alienating citizens to the point that significant changes are no longer feasible.

Many Central Americans who have joined the ranks of migrants toward the United States and Mexico are not only fleeing chronic poverty and violence; in addition to these factors, they have given up hope that national institutions will respond to their plight and work for their safety and well-being. These migrants are abandoning political societies that have ignored their problems and failed to respect their voices. In the LACC study of Central Americans in transit through Mexico, respondents typically indicated that they had abandoned any hope that their governments or institutions would make a difference in their precarious lives. When asked how much they respected the political institutions in their countries, 68% said that they had little or no respect for them. Among Hondurans, the largest group in the sample, this percentage reached 74.4%.

Comparing the results of LACC’s migration pilot study with those of Vanderbilt University’s AmericasBarometer (AB) survey helps shed light on the impact of popular disappointment with political institutions. The AB survey taps perceptions and opinions of

political institutions and events. It is a regional project, unique in its scope, nature and commitment to the scientific method. The surveys from which these data are drawn were carried out in the three Northern Triangle countries with samples of more than 1,500 interviewees per country. Since the LACC pilot study on migration used the same questions as the AB survey, the results allow for a direct comparison between the opinions of Central American migrants in transit in Mexico and their compatriots interviewed by Vanderbilt University in their home countries. Although the LACC sample is not representative of the Central American migrant population as a whole, it provides a window onto the political views of people who leave their countries in comparison with those who stay.

Table 1 compares the results of the migrant sample in the LACC pilot study with the national results of the AB survey to show the share of the population expressing trust or support for political institutions in each country. The first group of opinions refers to what David Easton has called diffuse support for political institutions; that is, long-term attitudes toward abstract institutions. The second group of opinions taps into what he calls specific support for political institutions, reflecting the level of public trust in concrete manifestations of the political system: the legislature, the presidency, security forces, political parties and the electoral apparatus. The results of the migrant sample are not disaggregated by nationality, given the low number of cases in the pilot study.

The data in Table 1 reveal a remarkable contrast between the views of the migrant population in the pilot study and those of the

Table 1. Percentage of Central Americans expressing support for the political system

Opinions	Migrant sample	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras
<i>Diffuse support</i>				
Believe that citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of their country	6.0	26.8	26.3	23.9
Respect the political institutions of their country	25.9	64.7	58.8	48.8
Feel proud to live under the political system of their country	8.6	36.4	37.0	32.1
Believe one should support the political system	22.9	56.1	58.7	44.9
Believe that the courts in their home country guarantee a fair trial	7.6	26.4	27.7	25.3
<i>Specific support</i>				
Trust the President of their home country	11.2	27.3	23.3	28.0
Trust the National Congress in their home country	6.0	31.9	28.7	25.7
Trust the Armed Forces in their home country	13.5	56.8	60.0	47.4
Trust the National Police in their home country	7.7	44.4	30.9	33.8
Trust political parties in their home country	8.5	17.1	25.9	16.2
Trust the electoral process in their home country	12.6	38.3	31.6	21.7

Sources: LAPOP, Statistical Compendium 2018/2019. Weighted Tabulations of Core Variables. [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2018/Statistical\\_Compendium\\_2018-19\\_W\\_10.22.19.pdf](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2018/Statistical_Compendium_2018-19_W_10.22.19.pdf); LACC, Central American Migration Pilot Study. Preliminary Results.

average citizen in the Northern Triangle countries. While both populations express generally low levels of support for the overall and specific institutions of their nations, migrants tend to manifest even lower levels of support for political institutions than citizens who have stayed at home. Only 6% of the Central American migrants interviewed in the pilot study believed that their rights were protected under the political systems of their countries, compared to nearly a quarter of the in-country respondents in the Vanderbilt survey. While most people in the Northern Triangle expressed disappointment in their political systems, the rate of disenchantment was even higher among migrants. With regard to feelings of respect, pride and general support for political institutions, the results also show a clear difference between the transient sample of Central Americans interviewed in Mexico

and their fellow citizens surveyed in their home countries. Another telling indicator is perceptions of whether the courts in the home country guarantee a fair trial. Less than 8% of the migrants believed they could expect fair treatment by their countries’ justice systems, indicating profound distrust in one of the institutions key to upholding the rule of law and combatting impunity.

Data on specific institutions show those contrasts even more clearly. All of the critical components of the political system – the presidency, legislature, security forces and political parties – received dismal reviews with regard to public trust. According to the AB survey, less than one-third of Central Americans in their home countries trust the presidency, the parliament or political parties. Nearly all migrants interviewed for the LACC pilot study, however, indicated their lack

of confidence in these institutions. Lawmakers and political parties, the institutions that are supposed to represent the interests of the population, enjoy the lowest levels of trust among Northern Triangle citizens.

Interestingly, the comparison between the AB survey and the migrant study also shows a substantial gap in confidence in security forces. While in-home respondents in the Northern Triangle reported limited trust in their national armies and police organizations, migrants graded them as poorly as they did civilian institutions. Diana’s testimonial helps explain this distrust. Many Central American refugees are fleeing not only ineffectual political institutions, but also security forces that collude with criminal organizations to prey on the most vulnerable.

Policy responses?

The results of the LACC pilot study are unambiguous: Many, if not most, Central American migrants seeking to settle in the north have given up hope in the political institutions of their home countries. Many come from communities controlled by gangs and criminal organizations, where they have been continually threatened and victimized. These same communities often suffer from a lack of basic services, unemployment, protracted droughts and failed harvests. Those leaving home are driven by severe social conditions that threaten their very survival, but failed political institutions are also a factor. More than two decades of political reforms, economic transformations and regular elections peppered by occasional political crises have been unable to guarantee a decent life and stable future for most Central Americans. For many citizens of the region, emigration seems like the only path to survival.

In the United States, the policy debate about mass immigration

from the Northern Triangle has swung between two short-sighted responses. One has been to inject millions of dollars into assistance programs for development in the region. The other is to shut down the southern border as part of a wider set of draconian immigration policies. After several decades, well-intentioned aid programs seeking dramatic short-term outcomes but lacking proper accountability have done little except enrich corrupt operators in the Northern Triangle. The second response, curtailing immigration, may have cut down on the numbers of undocumented immigrants entering the US, but it has created a humanitarian crisis in Mexico and other neighboring countries. The strains it has created have resulted in more violence, death and desperation across the region.

Washington needs to reshuffle its approach to Central American immigration. Given the urgent problems of structural inequality and chronic violence in the region, the US response should concentrate on the creation of democratically accountable institutions and far-

reaching efforts to uproot corruption and impunity from key political institutions. Plans that favor strengthening security forces to police migrants and the dispossessed in their countries of origin should be rejected. They will only add to the misery of communities besieged by criminal organizations.

Doing anything less than addressing the root, institutional causes of inequality and crime in Central America will amount to a decision to continue supporting questionable political leaders and lining the pockets of criminals. The problem requires a balanced effort that ties traditional development-related assistance to forceful accountability campaigns in the public sector. This must include an unwavering commitment to removing crooked officials and remodeling Central America’s democratic institutions to make them better capable of fighting injustice, corruption and impunity. Otherwise, Diana’s experience will continue to repeat itself in the suffering of thousands of migrants and refugees across the region.

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# The Venezuelan Migratory Crisis and Its Impact on Colombia

by Francesca Ramos Pismataro & Ronal F. Rodríguez

As of April 2020, nearly one-third, or 30.59%, of the Venezuelan population was in a situation of human mobility, according to official figures from the Colombian government and the United Nations. This number represents 9,974,515 of the country’s estimated total population of 32,605,423. Of these, 5,093,987 have migrated in response to the complex and prolonged humanitarian emergency that has afflicted the country in recent years, joining approximately 500,000 Colombian citizens who had been living in Venezuela but have since returned to their country of origin. An additional 4,880,528 people cross the porous border between Colombia and Venezuela daily, part of a pendular migration equivalent to 14.96% of the Venezuelan population. These short-term migrants depend on trips to Colombia for basic goods and services, staying anywhere from several hours to several months at a time. Their presence has had a significant impact on Colombian society and the nation’s resources.

While Venezuelans who go back and forth to Colombia cannot strictly be considered migrants, given that they do not reside definitively in another country, they reflect the dimensions of the phenomenon of human mobility between these two countries. They are also the only group of Venezuelan migrants for whom official figures are available,

thanks to the Tarjetas de Movilidad Fronteriza – Border Mobility Cards – issued by the Colombian government to regulate the legal traffic of Venezuelans into the country. In theory, cardholders must remain within a prescribed radius from the border, but over time many have ventured further afield, reaching as far as Bogotá, approximately 366 miles from the frontier.

Venezuela has also experienced a significant wave of internal displacement. An undetermined number of people have migrated in search of scarce goods and services, paralleling the collapse of the public utility infrastructure (electricity, drinking water, propane). Venezuela’s most populous state, Zulia in the northwest, has been particularly hard hit by the decline in public services, receiving electricity on a rotating six-hour schedule. Daily temperatures in the region average around 86° F, making refrigeration impossible. Estimates indicate that around 15% of Zulia’s 4.3 million inhabitants have migrated in three directions: 1) to other countries; 2) to the state of Táchira, the easiest crossing point to the main Colombian border city of Cúcuta; and 3) to the Venezuelan capital of Caracas, 433 miles away.

The government of Nicolás Maduro has limited the rights of Venezuelans to travel internationally and attempted to deny the phenomenon of human mobility. In practice, only those citizens with sufficient financial resources are

able to obtain the documentation necessary for foreign travel. In early 2020, the official fee for a Venezuelan passport was US\$196, an impossible figure for most citizens. On the black market, the going price approached US\$2,000. As a result, the only option for most Venezuelans is to cross the border with Colombia, a route increasingly under threat from human trafficking networks.

Officially, more than 10 million people have been affected by human mobility in Venezuela, including migrants, people crossing the border temporarily, displaced persons and returnees, but the number could in fact be much higher, taking into account rampant problems with documentation, passports and identification. Colombia is by far the country most affected by the phenomenon: As of April 2020, Colombia had an estimated 1,825,687 Venezuelans within its borders. Of these, only 43.78%, or 799,373, had legalized their status. The remaining 56.21%, or 1,026,305, were in the country illegally, although undocumented status is not currently a crime in Colombia.

Of the legal migrants, 568,330 have a Special Residency Permit (PEP), a temporary status Colombia has created to protect Venezuelans who remain in the country for more than 180 days. The permits have been issued at various times, free of charge and lasting two years. In recent years, the Colombian





Venezuelan migrants climb on a truck on the road from Cúcuta to Pamplona, in Norte de Santander Department, Colombia, on February 10, 2019. RAUL ARBOLEDA/AFP via Getty Images.

immigration agency, Migración Colombia, has been automatically renewing permits set to expire, in a display of solidarity with Venezuelan migrants.

Unlike their counterparts in Chile, Peru or Ecuador, the Colombian authorities have realized that it is unrealistic to expect Venezuelans to produce visas or additional documentation when their permits expire. In addition to granting permission to be in the country, the PEP gives migrants access to health care, education and a work permit. The best Venezuelans who migrate to Ecuador and Peru can hope for is a humanitarian visa, issued at a cost of US\$50 in Ecuador. This amount is out of reach for many migrants from Venezuela, where the average monthly wage was around US \$4.32 as of May 2020.

The Colombian government has also begun granting nationality to children born in Colombia between 2015 and 2021 to Venezuelan parents. So far, 27,825 children have benefited from this measure. Colombia normally does not follow the principle of *Jus Soli* (birthright citizenship), but given the fact that no Venezuelan consulates have been operational in Colombia since February 22, 2019, and that the Venezuelan government has denied citizenship to some children born across the border, the authorities in Bogotá have opted to award them nationality to ensure they are not stateless and that they have access to basic rights. Regardless of their migratory status, all Venezuelan children have a right to free education in Colombia, although only about one-third are estimated to be taking advantage of this benefit. In 2019, approximately 198,597 Venezuelan children and teenagers matriculated into Colombian schools. Many of them were significantly behind their

Colombian counterparts, obliging the government to invest additional resources into remedial classes and other measures.

The situation has been even more complicated when it comes to health care. The Colombian state provides free emergency care to all residents, regardless of nationality. This has been an important lifeline for Venezuelan migrants, given the widespread lack of basic medical services in their country. Non-emergency care remained out of reach to most until January 2020, when migrants were permitted to access the social security-based and subsidized health care systems. As noted above, PEP holders also have the same rights to health care as Colombian citizens.

Colombia is a country without much experience in managing immigration. Its prolonged armed conflict made it unattractive when compared to many other South American countries, which saw large waves of immigration in the twentieth century. For decades, the biggest challenge facing the country was internal migration as a result of internal violence, which displaced around 7.5 million people. In response to the Venezuelan crisis, NGOs and Colombian civil groups have joined the government's efforts to manage the flow of migrants. In the region along the border with Venezuela, for example, the Catholic Church has established soup kitchens to feed the influx of migrants. One such soup kitchen, known as *Divina Providencia*, employs 300 volunteers to provide breakfast and lunch to more than 5,000 people each day.

Generosity has its limits, however, and after more than five years of the migratory crisis Colombian society is beginning to show signs of compassion fatigue. Tensions

between Colombian communities and Venezuelan migrants have bubbled over into violence, and xenophobia and aporophobia have become more widespread. Political actors have emerged to exploit these fears, which have found fertile ground in a society with its own structural deficits to address.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is the reluctance to view the flow of migrants from Venezuela as a long-term phenomenon that will transform Colombian society. Venezuelan immigrants require sustained measures for socioeconomic integration. Until now, the Colombian government and society in general have taken an assistance-based and humanitarian approach to the problem. While admirable in terms of its generosity, this approach lacks a long-term vision. The flood of migrants crossing its borders represents an opportunity for Colombia to develop an immigration policy that responds to the human mobility challenges affecting Latin America today.

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# Bolivian Immigration in Argentina: Continuity or Change?

by Roberto Benencia

Immigration to Argentina from the Plurinational State of Bolivia, while a later phenomenon than the waves of Bolivian immigration to other countries in the region, has been one of the most successful in terms of the migrants’ prospects in the host country, particularly with regard to the variety of occupations they have been able to pursue there.

Until the mid twentieth century, intra-regional migration in Latin America was characterized by movements between neighboring countries, by rural-rural or rural-urban flows, and was often seasonal in nature. Argentina has long been a central pole of attraction for these flows. Bolivia, although an exporter of people to neighboring lands for centuries, saw such outflows pick up significantly in the 1950s, spurred by changes brought about by the 1952 revolution and the wave of import substitution industrialization in Argentina.

In this context, Bolivian migration to Argentina was fueled by regional economic growth and expansion around the 1930s, bringing with it a growing demand for rural labor. In northeastern Argentina, for example, the sugarcane and tobacco plantations of Salta and Jujuy required seasonal workers to harvest and process these crops, as did the burgeoning wine industry in Mendoza. Different growing seasons created a steady demand for labor throughout the year, as did

the need for unskilled workers in Argentina’s cities.

Starting in the late 1960s, the growing mechanization of production processes – especially in the sugar industry – and lower prices for many regional products began to reorient regional migration flows, leading workers to look beyond traditional cross-border migration to the opportunities presented by the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, especially in the construction sector. By 1970, more than one-third of Bolivians in Argentina were concentrated in Buenos Aires, with Argentina’s 1980 census showing that, for the first time, more Bolivian migrants resided in that city than in the country’s northeast (Salta and Jujuy). Their exact numbers, however, have been more difficult to determine, given the universal challenge of counting undocumented immigrants.

To understand what draws migrants from other Latin American countries to Argentina, Adriana Marshall and Dora Orlansky (1983) conducted a comparative study of Bolivian, Chilean and Paraguayan immigration to that country in 1970-1976. After interviewing migrants from these countries about the conditions that drove them to migrate, the authors found that in Bolivia – the country with the most factors pointing in that direction and the least capacity to absorb its excess rural work force – people did not turn to migration

in the elevated numbers that might have been expected. Despite offering even fewer possibilities for employment than Paraguay, due to higher urban unemployment and underemployment rates, as well as a more limited agricultural sector, Bolivia had a higher rate of internal vs foreign migration. One explanation, the authors suggested, is that Bolivia shares a much shorter border with Argentina than do Chile and Paraguay. As a result, a smaller portion of the Bolivian population is exposed directly to cross-border pull. In fact, residents of this border region account for the bulk of Bolivian migrants to Argentina.

Marshall and Orlansky identified additional elements contributing to migration, among them a tradition of emigration to a particular destination, especially in association with certain economic activities. These activities in turn often have a multiplying effect that draws other migrants from the sending country. Finally, factors such as wage differences between the sending and receiving country, and immigration policy toward migrants from specific countries, also play an important role in population movements.

Bolivian migration to Argentina, the authors note, began relatively recently (1950s) when compared to the other two countries under study. Bolivia’s socioeconomic structure was characterized historically by a servile role for the rural sector, keeping the population tied to



Dancing woman in traditional dress celebrate Bolivian Carnival in Buenos Aires, Argentina on October 21, 2018. Despite a long history of Bolivian migration to Argentina and associated adaptation, Bolivian migrants young and old still make an effort to preserve and practice their culture and traditions. NATALLIA SOLiStock by Getty Images.

the land and constituting a basic impediment to labor mobility. It wasn’t until the 1970s that Bolivia began to see an increase in internal migration, a phenomenon already commonplace in Chile and Paraguay. In the authors’ study, 41% of interdepartmental migration in Bolivia had occurred between 1971 and 1976.

In contrast to migrants from other neighboring countries (especially Paraguay and Uruguay), who tend to concentrate in Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area, the 2010 Argentine census and many studies have found that Bolivian immigrants – despite the fact that many settle in these areas as

well – are more evenly distributed around the country. Bolivians participate in a wide variety of occupations, including agricultural and clothing production, food and clothing sales, construction work and domestic service. Wherever they settle, they make an effort to preserve their culture, celebrating traditional holidays and wearing their traditional dress.

Fruit and vegetable production is one of the main activities of Bolivian migrants in Argentina. In agricultural areas serving the Greater Buenos Aires region and, indeed, around the country, Bolivians have become the primary workforce, gradually replacing previous waves

of migrants from Italy, Portugal and Japan.

Over time, a minority of Bolivian agricultural workers have risen from the category of simple peons to owning their own land and, in some cases, have become wholesale distributors of fruit and vegetables. Some have even been able to break away from crop production, a physically demanding occupation that exposes its practitioners to dangerous agricultural chemicals. In particular, the children of Bolivian agricultural workers often express a strong desire to seek other employment, and many have succeeded.

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# Unexpected Guests: Cuban and Haitian Migrants in Costa Rica, 2015-2017

by Luis G. Solís

In late October 2015, the Costa Rican Migration Police broke up a band of *coyotes* that had been operating in the country for several years. Mostly devoted to trafficking Cuban nationals traveling by foot from Ecuador, the band had successfully moved thousands of people across the border with Nicaragua on their way to the United States.

Cuban migrants had been hiding in Costa Rica, moving gradually towards the north as they recovered from their hazardous journey through Colombia and Panama, since at least 2008. They did so by taking advantage of favorable laws that granted them automatic asylum upon reaching US territory. They also benefitted from the Ecuadorian government's policy of "universal citizenship," which at the time did not require visas for admittance into that country. These special circumstances, in addition to the Cuban government's willingness to issue passports to any national leaving the island, contributed to the start of a new diaspora. The flow of migrants intensified in 2012, when rumors circulated in Havana that the US would soon reverse its privileged migration status for Cubans.

In less than two months, between October and December 2015,

Cuban arrivals in Costa Rica rose from 1500 to more than 8000. All were halted on the border with Nicaragua, in one of the poorest regions of Costa Rica, deprived of significant social services and with scarce lodging facilities. The impasse was the result of the unwillingness of the Nicaraguan government (and, later, most other Central American governments, with the exception of Panama) to allow free passage to Cuban migrants. Thanks to the personal involvement of Presidents Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico and Juan Carlos Varela of Panama, as well as two airline companies, several bus operators that offered their services to the migrants at cost value, and a lot of hard work of by Costa Rican authorities and diplomats, the situation was finally resolved. The Costa Rican government was able to arrange a "land and air bridge" to the Mexico-US border, and by early April 2016, all of the Cuban migrants had settled in their new destinations.

The Costa Rican government, suffering from an endemic fiscal deficit, lacked the financial resources to provide humanitarian support to this unexpected wave of migrants. Neither did it have in place the protocols to deal with such a large migrant contingent, which Costa Rica had not experienced since the

years of the Nicaraguan Revolution in the 1970s. Diplomatically, the situation was also tense: Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, the Central American countries, Mexico and the United States all had different agendas for dealing with the migrants. The existing multilateral framework was fragile, due to the (mostly) economic nature of the migrants, and the unrealistic categorization of Costa Rica as a "middle-to-high" human development country not eligible to receive significant cooperation from the international community. Fortunately, unlike other migrants, who typically lack even the minimal resources to survive, Cubans tended to have at least some financial resources, either their own or assistance provided by family and friends, which they accessed through financial intermediaries along the way. These resources made it possible for them to pay for their transportation to the US and obtain food and lodging at private establishments in Costa Rica.

In 2016, an estimated 30,000 Cubans were living in Ecuador, most of them aspiring to migrate to the US. Had the surge of migration continued, the stage would have been set for a major crisis. Ultimately, however, the flow stopped in response to a combination of public and private



Cubans wave goodbye to friends departing by bus from La Cruz, Guanacaste, Costa Rica to go to the airport in nearby Liberia on January 12, 2016. Elation and trepidation gripped the first group of Cuban migrants to fly out of Costa Rica on a trial air-and-land journey to start new lives in the United States. CARLOS GONZALEZ/AFP via Getty Images.

policies. First, Ecuador abandoned its universal citizenship model and began requiring travel visas for Cubans entering the country. Second, Cuba restricted the number of passports issued to citizens traveling to Ecuador. And lastly, the US came to the realization that the special privileges it offered Cubans were indeed a magnet for migrants from the island and eventually ended them with significant bipartisan support.

Another flow of migrants appeared at the Costa Rican border with Panama in early April 2016. At the beginning, the authorities believed these migrants came from French-speaking West Africa, but soon it became apparent that most of them were Haitians, fleeing hunger and unemployment in Brazil. These particular migrants did not find a warm welcome from the US government, which advised them to turn back or seek refuge in other countries. The northern Central American nations concurred and blocked their borders once again. Panama and Costa Rica, however, the southernmost nations of the Central American isthmus, did not have the resources (or the moral insensitivity) to stop them. Arriving by foot, often after enduring awful physical and emotional conditions in Colombia and Ecuador, many (mostly women)

claimed they had been subject to horrific abuse from national security forces and armed, non-state actors.

Between April 2016 and early 2017, some 23,000 Haitians, out of more than 200,000 living in Brazil since 2010, passed through Costa Rica, and this is probably an underestimate. Because of their large numbers and total dependency on official support, the Haitians stayed in camps serviced by the Costa Rican Red Cross and the Ministries of Public Security, Health, and Social Affairs. Unlike the Cubans who came before them, the Haitians knew that they could not count on government support to travel north. They moved faster in and out of the camps (or did not use them at all), seeking a way out of Costa Rica with the help of *coyotes* as soon as they could, despite efforts by the Costa Rican police to stop them. This complicated the recording of names, many of which were false from the outset. Linguistic issues further complicated many cases. Adults traveling with children often lacked the documentation to prove their parenthood, and cultural issues and racism clouded the relations between the migrants and local communities. The situation created a significant challenge for the Costa Rican authorities, especially due to the need to address security concerns regarding the likely

presence among the migrants of nationals from Sudan, Oman and Yemen, countries alleged to harbor terrorist organizations.

The Haitian exodus slowed significantly in 2018, when Brazil renewed its commitment to support its migrant community. By then, thousands of Haitians had traveled to Chile and Peru, where they received refuge. Many others were discouraged from travel to the US by the Trump Administration's open hostility to migrants. The migration phenomenon is latent, however, and could restart at any time. This is an era of human mobility, and Latin America and the Caribbean are no exceptions to that rule. If massive and sustained, migrations could create immense havoc, especially in smaller nations, but even in bigger ones, as the Venezuelan-Colombian case clearly shows. In times of global fear and uncertainty, governments in the region would do well to prepare a contingency plan for this scenario.

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# Opportunities and Challenges for Haitian Migrants in Chile

by Roody Reserve

Immigration plays an important role in Haiti's economy and welfare, not only for those Haitians who decide to leave the country in search of a better life, but also for those who stay behind. According to Luis Felipe López Calva, United Nations Assistant Secretary General and UNDP Regional Director for Latin American and the Caribbean, as of 2017 more than one-third of Haiti's GDP depended on remittances from citizens living abroad, the highest level in Latin America. Public opinion data from AmericasBarometer reveal that in any given year from 2008 through 2017, at least 50% of Haitians reported that their households received remittances from family members or friends living abroad, with a peak of 66% in 2012. In the same period, at least one-fifth reported depending heavily on these remittances.

Emigration is one of the few options left to young Haitians faced with political tensions, repression and dire economic situations due to natural disasters and bad decision making by economic and political elites. The necessity to migrate has been particularly acute since the end of the Duvalier dictatorship in the mid 1980s. After repeated failed attempts to institute meaningful political changes, many Haitians, especially the young and educated, have determined that the best way to

secure a better life for themselves and their families is to "vote with their feet," abandoning their dream to transform the country from within. It is in this context that a new wave of migrants has set its sights on South America, and Chile in particular.

As of late 2018, according to Chile's National Institute of Statistics, the country was home to 179,338 Haitians. They represented 14.3% of all foreigners in Chile, the third most numerous nationality after Venezuelans and Peruvians. The influx has been rapid; the 2012 census, for example, did not even list Haitians among foreigners residing in Chile. Why has Chile experienced such a surge of Haitian migrants in recent years? What is their situation in the country? What kind of challenges have they faced in a context of social unrest and instability?

## *In search of new destinations*

After the massive earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010, it was clear to most observers that a massive influx of aid would be necessary, not only to bring immediate help to the survivors, but also to give a modicum of hope to young people that they would be able to rebuild their lives in Haiti. Two years earlier, in 2008, Hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hanna and Ike devastated Gonaïves, the fourth largest Haitian city. The estimated US\$1 billion in economic damages from these hurricanes, combined with \$8 billion from the earthquake, meant that in just two years Haiti

had lost nearly 50% of its GDP to natural disasters.

At a 2010 donors conference in New York, a range of governments and organizations promised more than US\$10 billion to reconstruct the country. In practice, however, not all of this support materialized, and a good part of the aid that did was lost to corruption and bad administrative decisions, further debilitating the Haitian state. In this context, many Haitians, especially young people, turned to emigration as one of the only feasible options left to build their future.

Chile, Brazil and other South American countries were especially attractive destinations. Some Haitians had had contact with military representatives from these countries, thanks to their participation in the UN Mission for Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH). In interviews conducted in 2010 in Chile, many Haitian migrants said that their decision to immigrate to that country was in part motivated by friends from the Chilean army who had been stationed in Haiti. Just as important was the fact that Chile was at that time one of the few countries where Haitians could travel without a visa.

The treatment accorded Haitians in the Dominican Republic was another factor redirecting the flow of migration. In 2013, after many years of propaganda against Haitians, the Dominican Constitutional Court decided that children born to migrants without legal status in the

A Haitian migrant carries a backpack as he walks to board a Chilean military plane taking him back to Haiti at the Military Air Base in Santiago, on November 7, 2018. Some 1000 Haitians registered in a "voluntary return plan" launched by the Chilean government. The program was aimed at any of the 165,000 Haitians who lived in Chile in 2018 and wished to return to their country after failing to adapt. MARTIN BERNETTI/AFP via Getty Images.



country would not be considered Dominican nationals. The ruling was said to be applicable retroactively to 1929. Scores of Dominicans of Haitian decent would lose the nationality they had acquired by birth. Many Haitians left the Dominican Republic for Chile following this ruling. According to journalist Jonathan M. Katz, and based on data from Human Rights Watch, from 2015-2018 Dominican authorities deported an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 people of Haitian descent—more than a quarter of the Dominico-Haitian population. By late 2018, the Dominican government has only restored citizenship documents to about 19,000 of those denationalized in the five years since the ruling.

**Chile's reception of Haitian migrants**

When the current wave of immigration started, in 2010 and 2011, Haitians migrants were mostly well received in Chile. In personal interviews conducted with new arrivals attending free Spanish-language classes in Santiago, migrants from Haiti usually declared that, in spite of difficulty adapting to the language and the climate, they felt that they would be able to integrate

into Chilean society. Racism was not the first obstacle they identified in their attempts to settle in Chile.

As the number of Haitian migrants has increased, however, along with increasing migration from Venezuela, Colombia and the Dominican Republic, this has changed. From 2014 to 2017, the Haitian presence in Chile grew by an astounding 4,433%. In the same period, the number of Venezuelans increased by 1057% and Colombians, 507%. Perhaps because of the increased pressure on Chilean resources, the welcome Haitians once received in that country has begun to wear thin. Many Haitian migrants in Chile experience food insecurity. They are also reported to be the subject of most of the debate about immigration in Chile, even though they do not represent the largest group of foreigners in the country. The conversation is mostly negative and tainted by racism.

The growing presence of Haitians in Chile has meant that their importance to the Haitian economy has soared, as well. Some studies show Chile in second place in the amount of remittances sent to Haiti, after the United States and Canada.

**The challenges ahead**

As the citizens of Chile grapple with the reality of a more diverse society, many challenges lie ahead for Haitian migrants. First, they face an urgent need to better organize with other migrant communities to develop a collective response to the suspicious attitudes and sometimes blatant racism they encounter in some sectors of society. Second, they will need diplomatic support from state officials in Haiti to better protect their status abroad.

The current context of political unrest in Chile, where the discussion centers around a new social pact aimed at alleviating inequality, offers an opportunity to find ways to integrate migrants into Chilean society. It represents a chance to change the prevailing view of immigrants as a source of cheap labor whose vulnerability is easily exploited to deny them basic human rights. With improved organization and the support of the many Chilean organizations that actively support migrant communities, the new social pact under debate could take up the challenge to contribute to social integration, a feature that is lacking in the current discussion about migrant communities in Chile.

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Nicaraguan and Cuban homeless migrants demonstrate outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office to demand help during the coronavirus pandemic in San José, Costa Rica on April 21, 2020. EZEQUIEL BECERRA/AFP via Getty Images.

# Migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica and the Impact of COVID-19 (2018-2020)

by Alberto Cortés Ramos

Migrationary flows between Nicaragua and Costa Rica run in a north/south direction. Two key factors explain this trend: first, the consistently stable political environment in Costa Rica, in contrast to the authoritarian and violent nature of political regimes throughout Nicaraguan history; and second, the dynamics of the Costa Rican

productive system, in particular, the need for foreign labor to harvest crops and fill other jobs local workers are unwilling to perform, such as construction and domestic chores. A third factor, which has gained importance in recent years, is the strength of the Costa Rican social security and educational systems. These benefits are generally available to all of the country's inhabitants, regardless of their citizenship or migratory status.

**The dynamics of migration between Nicaragua and Costa Rica**

Since the end of the nineteenth century, political and economic factors have driven migration cycles from Nicaragua to Costa Rica. Significant migration began in the 1880s, when Nicaraguans helped build the railway to Costa Rica's Caribbean coast. Later, and until the middle of the twentieth century, thousands of Nicaraguan workers sustained the banana plantations in the Caribbean and Pacific lowlands.



A constant flow of political refugees joined the flood of migrants during the years of the Somoza dynasty (1936-1979), growing in significance in the early 1970s, when repression and political violence increased and the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) used Costa Rica as a strategic rearguard in the final stages of its war against the dictatorship.

By the time of the Sandinista victory in July 1979, an estimated 80,000 Nicaraguan migrants resided in Costa Rica. A decade later, after the abuses of the Sandinista regime and the US-funded *contra* war, the number had risen to more than 120,000, nearly 40,000 of them enjoying refugee status. Most of this population returned to Nicaragua in 1990, after the electoral triumph of President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro over Daniel Ortega, but the returnees' dream of a new Nicaragua characterized by democracy, peace and prosperity soon proved elusive.

The profound transformations of the early 1990s ushered in a new cycle of political and economic instability in Nicaragua. Besieged by an aggressive and well-organized Sandinista opposition, harassed by its own political allies, and coping with the adjustments to newly acquired democratic institutions (privatizations, disarmament of the *contras*, transformation of the Sandinista Party militia into a true National Armed Force, election of a non-partisan judiciary, severe droughts and recurrent famine in the northern highlands, among other pressures), the Chamorro government was incapable of ensuring economic growth and internal peace. At the same time, Costa Rica was beginning a cycle of economic diversification and

expansion. Observing the contrast between the two countries, urban and rural Nicaraguans alike resumed their pilgrimage to the south in what would become the largest migration cycle in binational history.

In 1999, as a result of a pact with President Arnoldo Aleman, the FSLN gained new status as a political power broker, culminating in Ortega's return to the presidency in 2006. Despite his refusal to surrender political power in several electoral processes marred with irregularities, economic stability gradually returned to Nicaragua. Largely resulting from Ortega's privileged relationship with the Chávez and Maduro regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua's GDP grew by a consistent 5% between 2013 and 2018. Even so, census figures show that between 2011 and 2020, the Nicaraguan population in Costa Rica grew from 287,766 to around 500,000, representing approximately 12% of the national population. This is one of the highest percentages in Latin America, especially considering Costa Rica's size (only 50,000 sq. km, a little smaller than Alabama, Arkansas or North Carolina), and its weak economy, which was already faltering prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A new cycle of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica began on April 18, 2018 when the Nicaraguan government announced a series of social security reforms that included taxing pensions. Protests by university students, civil society activists, feminists and senior citizens affected by the reforms were violently suppressed by FSLN shock forces and the National Police. The crackdown was broadcast live for more than three hours on national television and went viral on social media soon after. The official repression spurred even more students to take to the streets over

the following days and to occupy the public university campuses. The regime's reaction was brutal and unexpected; instead of seeking a negotiated settlement of the crisis, the government authorized paramilitary groups and the National Police to step up their use of violence against the protesters. By May, some 360 people (mostly unarmed civilians) had been killed or disappeared, more than 600 imprisoned without trial, and dozens of women raped in one of the most violent state-sponsored terror campaigns in Nicaragua since 1979. Unyielding to international pressure and direct appeals from the United Nations, the Vatican and the Organization of American States, and determined not to allow any signs of internal fractures, the regime continued its repressive actions, forcing many opponents – students and journalists, in particular – to seek asylum in Costa Rica.

Between January and March 2018, the Costa Rican authorities received only 22 refugee applications from Nicaraguans. By early June, after snipers attacked the Mother's Day parade in Managua, the number of applications rose to 3344, and in July, it reached 5279. Between June 2018 and March 2020, an average of 2900 Nicaraguans applied for refugee status in Costa Rica every month, for a total of about 70,000 new applicants in two years.

#### ***Fiscal and economic pressures in Costa Rica***

The Costa Rican government, coping with a critical financial situation and resulting social conflict in the second half of 2018, could not have foreseen the abrupt arrival of tens of thousands of people fleeing violence and repression in Nicaragua. At the time, unemployment in Costa Rica stood at more than 10%,



*A Nicaraguan activist wears a face mask and goggles to prevent the spread of coronavirus while he distributes food to Nicaraguan migrants living on the streets of San José, Costa Rica, on April 16, 2020. EZEQUIEL BECERRA/AFP via Getty Images.*



further complicating the insertion of the arriving migrants into the labor market. The adverse economic context inhibited the ability of the Costa Rican authorities to channel public resources toward the migrant influx, but even scant support triggered xenophobic reactions from some sectors of the local population. On August 18, a small but vocal protest erupted in the capital of San José calling for the expulsion of Nicaraguans from the country. Most Costa Ricans rejected the protesters’ tone as well as their demands, but the implications were clear: an ill-handled migration policy could have serious consequences for social peace.

With the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migrations and other civil society organizations, the Costa Rican authorities expedited identification cards and work permits for migrants within three months of application for refugee status. This allows for the regularization of employment conditions while improving the personal and family situations of refugees in the country. Nevertheless, Costa Rica has a rigid policy for granting refugee status. Only 25% of all cases are approved. The explanation for this seemingly Draconian policy is twofold: on the one hand, the government fears that the easing of refugee status could be interpreted as an open-door policy that would encourage an uncontrollable flow of migrants; on the other hand, there are well-grounded concerns that flexibilization could open the door to people linked to international criminal networks, particularly the so-called *maras* (gangs), traveling through Nicaragua from the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

*Characteristics of the Nicaraguan refugee population*

The latest wave of migrants to Costa Rica from Nicaragua is very different from those that preceded it. To begin with, the motivation for leaving Nicaragua is mostly political. Today’s migrants are often civil and political activists, journalists or human rights defenders fleeing persecution under the Ortega regime. In terms of social capital, they have a higher level of education and, because of their practical experience as activists, a greater capacity to make themselves heard and claim their rights. University students, professionals, and civil, political and intellectual leaders figure prominently among the migrants. They are a highly connected community that has managed to maintain an important level of articulation based on territorial, political and sectoral affinities.

Thanks to their social networks, these migrants also maintain relationships with their families, communities and organizations in Nicaragua, transforming their linkages into a truly transnational social space. In Costa Rica, they are able to engage in online activism impossible to pursue in Nicaragua due to government restrictions. Unlike previous waves of migrants, who tended to send remittances home to their families, the new arrivals receive support from their relatives in Nicaragua and other countries, especially the United States.

Those migrants from rural areas also behave differently than their predecessors. Most have resisted insertion into the agribusiness plantations along Costa Rica’s northern border, choosing to rent land and cultivate it themselves. For them, producing food for

their organizations and fending for themselves is a way of resisting and fighting the Ortega regime. In this process, they have demonstrated a great political, productive and organizational capacity.

Despite the initiative they have shown, Nicaraguans seeking refuge in Costa Rica since 2018 have faced significant obstacles, including employment. Those with professional careers have struggled to validate their credentials in Costa Rica. Previous waves of Nicaraguan migrants typically sought unskilled jobs that paid the worst salaries and for which there was little local competition, but newer arrivals may be perceived as a threat to the Costa Rican professional sector, potentially competing for jobs in a context of economic crisis and high unemployment. This could become an even more serious problem following the COVID-19 crisis.

A second critical issue for newly arrived migrants is gaining access to the public health system. While historically Costa Rica has given Nicaraguans direct access to health care, new requirements and obstacles are inhibiting migrants from receiving services. Institutionalized xenophobia hinders the foreign population from accessing health services even in an emergency, including some cases when individuals have insurance.

*The COVID 19 crisis and the refugee population*

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Central America and the rest of the world. While the impact the pandemic will have on migration flows from Nicaragua into Costa Rica in the coming months and years is still uncertain, several changes can already be observed.

First, the flow of migrants has decreased significantly. In response to the pandemic, many Nicaraguans returned to their home country, reacting both to the strict measures taken by Costa Rica in closing its borders and the prospect of deteriorating economic conditions. Facing the possibility of a productive catastrophe in Costa Rica, many migrants chose to return to their home country, despite the risks.

Second, the Costa Rican government implemented the so-called “Protect Bond,” a 3-month payment of between US\$110 and \$220 to people without income or whose wages were significantly diminished by the crisis. The bonus was also available to refugees and asylum seekers with a provisional identity card, a group representing about half of the total migrant population. Despite efforts by UNHCR to support those who had not yet regularized their immigration status, a good part of the migrant population faced destitution.

Third, the Ortega-Murillo regime’s irresponsible management of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup> has raised grave concerns in Costa Rica that thousands of sick Nicaraguans will be forced to travel to neighboring countries for health services that their own government is unable to provide. In that scenario, it would not be farfetched to imagine a collapse of the Costa Rican medical system and mass infection of the local population. This fear was fueled by the rapidly increasing numbers of COVID-19 patients filling the

already insufficient and ill-equipped hospital space in Nicaragua and the detection of dozens of migrants testing positive for COVID-19 in the border region. These migrants were quarantined and hospitalized at once, but such reports raised concerns of a xenophobic reaction against the refugee population in the country.

One final element to note is that the seasonal rural migrants who travel to Costa Rica for relatively short periods of time (4 to 9 months) will not be allowed to enter the country until the pandemic is significantly under control. Given the dependence of transnational agrobusiness on this foreign workforce, the potential labor shortage has created alarm that crops could be lost. Any relaxation of border restrictions to allay these concerns or attempts to thwart the regulations could become a source of coronavirus infection throughout the country.

Nobody can know how the pandemic will evolve in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, but even without it the political crisis surrounding the Ortega regime is far from over and could enter another acute phase as national elections approach in 2021. The economic scenario does not look positive for any country in Central America, much less for Nicaragua, given the untrustworthiness of the government, the sanctions it faces from the US and other international actors, and the productive disarray caused by the increasingly repressive and dictatorial Ortega regime.

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<sup>1</sup> As of this writing, Ortega refused to acknowledge the threat that the COVID-19 pandemic represented for the Nicaraguan people and dismissed the “stay at home” campaign promoted by the opposition and civil society organizations. The Ministry of Health failed to provide reliable information and statistics, let alone testing for the virus. FSLN party structures throughout Nicaragua, following Ortega’s orders, promoted mass gathering without any consideration for social distancing.



# Population Movements and Climate Change

by Gabriela Hoberman & Juan Pablo Sarmiento

Human societies are already experiencing the effects of climate change. These include both slow-onset processes, such as changes in evaporation patterns and accelerated sea-level rise, and disasters triggered by rapid-onset events or shocks, including intense high/low temperatures, precipitation, tropical storms and forest fires. At any given time, the underlying risk factors associated with development processes - poverty, marginality, land tenure and land use issues, inequality, and access to social services, among them - cumulatively influence and shape these chronic stresses and shocks. Human population movements are one consequence of the convergence of climate change, extreme events, and underlying socio-economic risk factors.

Although no clear cause and effect has been established to explain this relationship, an upward trend in population movements can be foreseen as an extreme adaptation strategy in response to climate change, extreme weather events, or disasters. Many such migrations occur when people are left with no other viable option. These movements are generally called ‘displacements’ when they occur within a country, and ‘migration’ when the movement crosses

national borders. The International Organization for Migration defines environmental migrants as “persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.” In 2018, the World Bank estimated that Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America together could be dealing with more than 140 million internal climate-displaced people by 2050.

Global studies of climate variability and international migration show that disasters associated with natural hazards, measured as the sum of episodes with short-term environmental shocks, are associated with increased emigration. The natural and direct short-term consequence of certain socio-natural disasters, such as severe floods, hurricanes, or forest fires, is for people to move away from the affected regions to save their lives. In 2017, according to the Swiss-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, natural disasters alone accounted for the displacement of 17.2 million people globally. To take an example from the United States, estimates suggest that between 100,000 and 150,000 evacuees

moved to Houston to escape Hurricane Katrina in August 2009. In total, 80% of the population, or approximately 385,000 people, left New Orleans due to the same event and caused a massive increase in labor supply in the surrounding regions. In other parts of the world, severe earthquakes or volcanic eruptions often cause parts of the local population to leave home, at least temporarily. When the occurrence of a certain socio-natural disaster is predictable, short-term migration could begin even before the disaster. In September 2017, Hurricane Irma provoked the largest evacuation in the history of Florida, with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants moving north to seek safer conditions.

Disasters can occur anywhere, but developing countries are the most vulnerable to their effects. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Belize, Cuba, and Haiti were among the 10 countries with the largest disaster displacements relative to population in 2018. These and other developing countries are unable to improve their resilience pre-event or efficiently manage post-disaster effects. In many countries, remittance play an important mitigating role, helping build resilience and reducing the adverse effects of disasters on household livelihood. Without financial liquidity, migration is less likely to occur in response to slow-onset



Bahamian climate refugees of Hurricane Dorian arrive at the Kendal GL Isaacs National Gym on September 6, 2019, in Nassau, New Providence. Over 70,000 were left homeless while thousands more evacuated to the US. BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images.

events. Even in rapid-onset events, liquidity restrictions may force many people to relocate only temporarily or embark on short-distance movements.

Findings such as the ones discussed above have helped improve our understanding of the effect

of climate change on population movements. Nevertheless, existing empirical studies of the effects of climate and socio-natural disasters on population movements differ in several dimensions, including sample type, timelines, displaced/migrant approach, retrospective/prospective studies,

and measurement techniques. An agreement on standards would represent an important step in allowing us to advance methodologically and deepen our understanding of this ever-growing threat to human security.

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*Migrant Mother's Day.  
Central American mothers  
and their children in a migrant  
shelter in Juárez, Mexico,  
on May 10, 2019.  
DAVID PEINADO/NurPhoto via Getty Images.*

# Women Migrants in Latin America: Following World Trends?

by Alejandra Mora Mora

Women have played an active role in migrations throughout history, but in recent years their numbers have increased, along with the complexity of the situations they face. Highlighting and identifying gender-differentiated impacts and their interconnections in the lives of the more than 120 million migrant

women and girls in the world today contributes to humanize the specificity of their experiences and shed light on the female dimensions of this phenomenon in Latin America and the Caribbean, and around the world.

The more visible women and girls are in migratory flows, the greater our chances of understanding and addressing specific regional trends.

This article, therefore, calls attention to two crosscutting phenomena that, in addition to factors such as poverty and insecurity, typically accompany migrant women on their journeys: domestic care and violence.

The sexual division of labor that assigns women to care not only for sons and daughters, but also older adults and family members with disabilities or illness, affects

all aspects of women's lives. As reported in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2018, according to time-use data from 29 countries, one-third of them in Latin America, women spend on average twice as much time as men on housework, and especially care activities. Dedication more time to these types of duties inevitably inhibits their ability to engage in any type of paid labor.

Domestic care is also central to the migration process for women. On the one hand, women forced to leave their dependents behind, or send them alone under the care of a relative or even a stranger, suffer from anxiety and feelings of guilt. This becomes especially traumatic in the case of minors. On the other hand, women who care for dependents during migratory journeys face both physical and psychological exhaustion. The long journeys migrants endure often cause health problems such as dehydration, sunburn and other conditions aggravated by severe food shortages, particularly in children and older people who require special care.

If they are fortunate enough to reach their destinations, the sexual division of labor and lack of job skills required by more competitive labor markets relegate many migrant women to domestic work, often in conditions characterized by a total lack of protection. For these women, social security regimes are inaccessible, and poverty is perpetuated.

Countries that collect data on the labor behavior of foreigners can attest to the prevalence of women in the domestic sector. In Costa Rica, a 2013 study by the International Organization for Migration found that the majority of migrant men

(mostly Nicaraguan) worked in agriculture, manufacturing and construction, while women were concentrated in the manufacturing and service industries, where they earned among the lowest wages in the salary structure, and in household activities, including domestic care.

Migrant women hired to provide domestic labor, both within Latin America and in destination countries such as the United States, afford their women employers the opportunity to work in other more permanent and profitable formal sectors of the economy. This in turn denies the very same opportunity to the migrant women they employ. The scenario essentially generates a zero sum cycle of discrimination and inequality and one of negative interdependence. Yet, this phenomenon is seldom registered in national statistics because it occurs in the private sphere, is driven by informal hiring practices, and often functions within a context worthy of social and moral critique. Paradoxically, the same migrants that are maligned as being undesirable or less capable simply due to their socioeconomic status, cultural differences or ethnicity are brought into their employers' homes to care for their children and elderly members of the family, cook their food, and work in the most intimate corners of their domestic sphere.

Violence is another crosscutting phenomenon for female migrants. In addition to domestic violence, a frequent driver of migration for women, pervasive organized crime also spurs many women (for example, in the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America, formed by Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) to flee environments dominated by gangs and permanent social conflict.

Unfortunately, flight creates its own risk of violence. Migrant women are subject of multiple forms of violence, including sexual violence, "sextorsion" and rape, and may be driven by deception or coercion into sex labor or trafficking. Complaints of sexual violence have even been made against border security agents and migration services. Many such accounts were shared by the Cuban and Haitian migrants passing through Costa Rica from Ecuador during the 2015-2017 exodus.

In response to the problem of trafficking, the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI) urged the 32 signatory states to adopt the standards of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). Unfortunately, the legislation and its effective implementation are still pending in most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

In 2016, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identified more than 25,000 trafficked persons, noting that the figure has been rising consistently since 2011. According to UNODC, trafficking in persons includes abuses such as sexual exploitation, forced labor or exploitation. In 70% of cases worldwide, the victims were women and girls. In Central America and the Caribbean, 55% of the victims were girls and 25% adult women. In South America, of the 3,000 victims identified, 31% were girls and 51% women. The most common complaint was sexual exploitation. Many migrant women do not report violent incidents for fear of official reprisals that



could lead to deportation. This intimidation weakens efforts to identify and protect the victims, as well as the administration of justice for violence against women at each stage of the migration process.

For migrant women from the region fortunate enough to reach the United States, the difficulty of quantifying the true extent of the violence they encounter often works against them in the asylum process. In a 2006 study, Ana Silvia Monzón reported that in the five years previous, the US authorities recognized a total of just 856 women from Mexico and Central America as refugees. The granting of refugee status is a complex procedure whose fairness and legality has been repeatedly challenged, without success, by many NGOs and humanitarian groups.

From a feminist perspective, migrant women and girls face a double invisibility with regard to

the actors who are supposed to protect them: first, because they are women whose specific realities are not adequately taken into account; and second, because their particular situations are undervalued to the point of ceasing to be a priority on the state agenda. In practice, this double invisibility has concrete implications for the rights of migrant women and girls. Specifically, the economic impact of the domestic labor women supply cannot be measured in a satellite account, nor do concepts exist to understand this situation in relation to, and differentially from, men's labor. In addition, women's work is characterized by inconsistent remuneration and a lack of regulation and public debate on working conditions. As for violence against migrant women, there is a lack of formal channels for registering complaints or raising awareness of the problem, resulting in widespread impunity that puts the lives of women and girls at risk.

Due to all of these factors, migrant women do not perceive the same benefits and guarantees or the same autonomy and economic independence from their participation in productive employment as do men. Consequently, poverty, violence and discrimination in migratory movements increasingly have a woman's face, body and soul, intensified and conditioned further by race or ethnicity, social class and age.

Only precise and differentiated statistical recording, along with fair and effective implementation of legislation, policies and programs aimed at managing human flows that address specific needs, will help us move closer to the goal of enabling thousands of migrant women in Latin America and the Caribbean to live their lives in certainty and without fear.

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*HIV Testing Booth in Lummus Park on Ocean Drive in South Beach, Miami Beach's most popular tourist area. JEFFREY GREENBERG/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.*

# South Florida: HIV/Drug Epidemics, Immigrant Ethnic Sexual Minorities and Tourism

by José Félix Colón Burgos

Geographically, the Florida peninsula is situated between two regions with high HIV prevalence rates: the southeastern United States and the Caribbean. In 2017, 52% of new HIV diagnoses in the US were in the South (17 states, including Florida). In 2018, Florida had the third-highest HIV case rate (23.4 per 100,000 people) of any state in the US, twice as high as the national average, and the South Florida tri-county region (Miami-

Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties) had the country's highest rate of HIV infection diagnoses. The same region also contains the two US metropolitan areas with the highest HIV case rates: Miami and Ft. Lauderdale (44.0 and 32.0 per 100,000, respectively). Nationally, Miami-Dade County ranks number one in new HIV infections.

The burden of HIV/AIDS is highly concentrated among immigrant ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities, with an observed increase among

Hispanic/Latinx's from subgroups such as gay-identified men, non-gay-identified men who have sex with men (MSMs), and transgender or gender variant persons. According to Gilbert & Rhodes (2013), these populations "constitute a particularly vulnerable subgroup which may be marginalized along multiple dimensions, including immigration status, language use, ethnic minority status, gender identity, or sexual orientation." A resurgence in stimulant use (cocaine, methamphetamines) is also related to a higher risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS, especially



within sexual minority groups such as MSMs. Studies consistently show that MSMs who use stimulants have a three-to sixfold greater risk of HIV seroconversion. This trend is corroborated by comparable increases in methamphetamine use and methamphetamine-induced deaths in South Florida.

*HIV/drug use epidemics and tourism*

The above statistics demonstrate the severity of the HIV/drug epidemic in South Florida, a region with a robust tourism sector. According to the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, in 2018 the Miami tourism industry received a total of 23.3 million people (international, domestic and Florida locals), employed 142,100 workers, and is estimated to have accounted for \$18 billion of the local economy. As a number of global research projects have shown, tourism areas generate conditions of HIV and drug abuse vulnerability, often through linkages to sex tourism, elevated rates of risky behaviors, and high rates of illicit drug use.

In South Florida, migration and mobility related to tourism are factors closely linked to the rising incidence of HIV among MSMs in the region. A recent study reported that 31.2% of 125 HIV-negative MSMs seroconverted within five years of migrating to tourist areas in South Florida, supporting the idea that MSMs who move to these areas are at heightened vulnerability to the virus. Exposure to circuit parties and ‘party drugs’ (e.g., methamphetamines, cocaine, and Ecstasy) has also been found to exacerbate an existing social climate of disinhibition and abandonment of sexual norms in MSM tourism environments. This is the reality that immigrant

ethnic sexual and gender minorities, such as Latinx MSMS (LMSMS), often encounter when migrating or moving to the South Florida area, especially Miami Dade County. Whether motivated by a desire to escape economic or political instability, or marginalized by homophobic and conservative heteronormative cultures in their home communities, these men move to South Florida in search of a new life of prosperity, equal rights, and greater acceptance of their sexual identities and orientation. At the same time, however, they can end up exposing themselves to a high-risk setting for HIV and drug abuse. Many new arrivals have no idea of the health vulnerability they will encounter in South Florida, especially if they work in the tourism sector.

*The pilot study and its results*

Between July 2018 and June 2019, I implemented a pilot exploratory study to gather the experiences of recent (5 years or less) and more established LMSM immigrants (both US- and foreign-born) working in the tourism sector on Miami’s South Beach. Tourism is one of the only economic sectors in which LMSMs, whether documented or undocumented, can find work in the formal or informal market. Guided by a previous study of the Caribbean tourism environment and Padilla’s theoretical tourism ecological framework, I employed several data collection methods. First, I conducted informal interviews with 18 informants, 13 of them from organizations that work on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in Miami-Dade and Broward County, to gather information regarding the social context of HIV in South Florida. Second, I recruited a theoretical sample of 36 LMSM migrant tourism workers and

conducted in-depth qualitative, semi-structured interviews with them to examine their perspectives on factors that shape the dual epidemics of drug use and HIV/AIDS in South Florida. Of the interviewees, 36.1%(n=13) were born in Venezuela, 22.2%(n=8) in Cuba, 11.1%(n=4) in the continental United States, 8.3%(n=3) in Puerto Rico, and 5.6%(n=2) in Argentina. The remaining 16.6%(n=6) were men born in Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Panama and Colombia. All of the participants’ names have been changed for the purpose of this article.

One of the recent LMSM immigrants was Juan, a 38-year-old Venezuelan working at a Miami Beach hotel. Many young Latino immigrants, he noted, “arrive in this country mainly undocumented.... Many people abuse them because they believe or know that they need papers and that they are an easy target for sex. And they [locals] go out with them for one or two months, they have sex with the newcomers and then they come and go with the other, and another, another, and another...”

When I asked Juan about his own experience, he replied: “Today, I am stable. I already feel much better, but starting from scratch in the United States was the most difficult stage in my entire life.... It was not difficult to leave home, it was not difficult to start from zero in Caracas. But starting from zero in the United States was not easy. I could not get a job because not having papers is ... it’s not easy. I had to live in a studio with a lady who rented a bunkbed. Very difficult...”

At the time of the interview (November 13, 2018), Juan had been in Miami for three years. He told me that in 2017 (about a



*Nightlife is one of the main tourist attractions of South Beach. According to an Argentine undocumented immigrant and informal South Beach tourist guide, “Paradise, vacation, sex, drugs; there cannot be one without the other.” ERICBARN/Pixabay.*

year and a half after arriving in South Florida), he became infected with HIV because of an accident with a needle while injecting steroids into his former partner. Regrettably, the former partner did not inform Juan that he was HIV positive. When I asked Juan about his health and how satisfied he was with the care that he had received in Miami, he answered in a very positive way but noted that he felt sad that he cannot go home and visit his family because of his immigration status. Obtaining the care he needs would also be much more difficult in Venezuela, he explained: “In Venezuela, there is no way to have access to medicine. For me, it would be impossible to return to my country now that I have acquired it [the virus].”

I heard a similar story from Fernando, a 28-year-old Cuban-born escort and former host at a popular Ocean Drive restaurant. Like Juan, Fernando finds himself isolated from his family since becoming HIV positive during his first few years in Miami. “To go to Cuba and face the reality and explain to my family that I have a disease, they would not understand it,” he maintained. Fernando has lived in Miami for six years, mostly in the South Beach area. In the interview, he started to tell me about his addiction to stimulants – cocaine and methamphetamines – and its connection to his informal and formal tourism work. When I asked Fernando if it was common to consume stimulants in his line of work, he replied: “No meth at work,

because meth is one of the most followed drugs here by the police... but yes, they use cocaine, all over the beach, all waiters on the beach, all the bartenders from the beach *huelen perico* [snort cocaine].”

He went on to describe what is informally called “party and play,” or “chemsex,” a term used “to indicate the voluntary intake of psychoactive and non-psychoactive drugs in the context of recreational settings to facilitate and/or to enhance sexual intercourse mostly among MSM” (Giorgetti et al., 2017, p.762). Methamphetamines are quite common in this setting, according to Fernando. “Actually, sex does not make me feel anything anymore,” he recounted. “You do it because of the



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addiction that the drug has. When they mention it, you immediately want to smoke.”

The social environment of tourism exacerbates the risk or enables this kind of “party”/chemsex

interaction. Miguel, a 34-year-old undocumented immigrant from Argentina working as an informal tourist guide, summed up the situation in poetic terms: “Tourism is linked to the sub-world of sex tourism, [and] the drug factor is the

axis or pillar that serves as the spark for this social practice .... There is a cohesion between them, and one cannot exist without the other. Paradise, vacation, sex, drugs; there cannot be one without the other.”

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