

Migration in Latin America

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What does the evidence say about migration flows, causes and issues in Latin America?

Table of Contents

1.	Summary	2
2.	Latin American Migration	3
3.	Migrant numbers.....	8
4.	Broader issues associated with migration in LAC	16
5.	References	17
6.	About this review.....	19
7.	Annex 1	20

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1. Summary

This rapid evidence review collates available evidence on migration in Latin America (flows, causes and issues). The review adopts a broad framing of migration in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region given that mixed migration flows in Latin America and the Caribbean are dynamic and often intersect; most countries are simultaneously points of origin, transit, destination, and return. Migration from Central and South America as well as Caribbean countries are typically referred to collectively under the broader LAC grouping.

This report is the first in a three-part series, with associated reports collating evidence on drivers of gender-based violence and migration, and donor activity and migration in LACs. The report is structured as follows:

- Section two provides a broad overview of LAC migration including drivers of decisions to move.
- Section three explores available data on migrant numbers, movement routes and countries of origin of those on the move.
- Section four provides an overview of wider issues associated with regional migration including sentiments related to migrant communities, child migration, remittances etc.
- Section seven (or annex 1) provides an overview of displacement tracking data to provide a snapshot of migrant profiles.

During recent years, migration flows in the LAC regions have changed significantly in terms of size, direction, general characteristics and their overall impact in countries of origin and host countries alike. Three major historic migration patterns have characterised population movement in the region:

- **Historical immigration into Latin America** from overseas between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, with a strong European component.
- **Intra-regional migration**, influenced by socio-economic developments and structural factors, particularly during 1970 to 1990, which saw high rates of migration within Latin America.
- **South-North migration flows**, resulting in the loss of qualified workers in LAC, the emergence of immigrant communities and the development of an economic potential associated with the remittances sent by migrants to countries of origin.

In LAC, two main trends are evident, **relatively large movements occur within the region. Additionally, a large number of people originating from the region have emigrated, mainly to North America** and, to a much lesser extent, to the European Union. It is noted that if regions currently afflicted with war or armed conflict are excluded, then **LAC is the region where most people migrate internationally.**

LAC migration has four contemporary characteristics

- **For decades the LAC region has witnessed extensive mixed migration.** Most Central American migrants (or others displaced across borders) reside in the USA, with increasing numbers in Mexico, Canada, Spain, and the Dominican Republic.

The characteristics of these movements are changing, and increasingly involve large numbers of vulnerable populations.

- **Venezuelan migration is increasingly relevant for Central American countries.** Data from the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V) shows that by September 2022, 144,545 were in Panama, and 30,107 were in Costa Rica. By August 2022, over 150,000 Venezuelans had arrived at the southern border of the USA seeking protection.
- **Haitians are migrating in significant numbers following disasters, conflict outbreaks, extreme poverty, and political instability.** These trends have accelerated after the assassination of President Moïse and the earthquake that devastated the country in 2021.
- **Since 2015, extra-regional migratory flows have intensified.** These include highly vulnerable people from Africa, Asia and other regions who come through the Darien Gap, passing through Central America on their way north to the USA.

A particular feature of contemporary migration in the LAC region is the impact that protracted crises in particular countries have on migrant flows. For example, the crisis in Venezuela has generated significant displacement of people, at the same time, there is a large and growing population of Haitians that have migrated to South America, and large numbers are moving from the Northern Triangle of Central America into Mexico and towards the United States, and from Nicaragua into Costa Rica.

The intention and decision to migrate depend on multiple interconnected factors.

They continue that the intention and decision to migrate are a multifactorial combination of drivers and family, individual, school, and community risk factors, with different degrees of influence, appear to explain the desire to migrate.

Mixed migration flows in LAC are dynamic and often intersect; most countries are simultaneously points of origin, transit, destination, and return. The LAC region is characterised primarily by intra-regional movements. Mixed migration movements in LAC gained global attention between 2017 and 2018, when the number of migrants from Venezuela sharply increased and impacted on countries in the region.

2. Latin American Migration

During recent years, migration flows in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) regions have changed significantly in terms of size, direction, general characteristics and their overall impact in countries of origin and host countries alike. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2002) identified three major historic migration patterns in LAC:

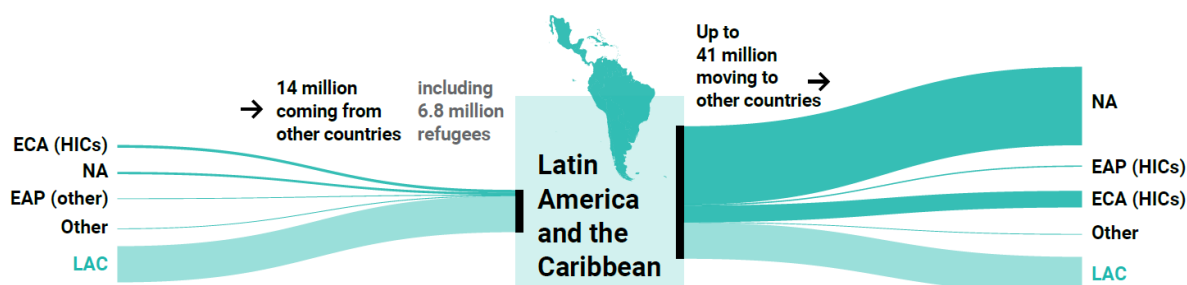
- **Historical immigration into Latin America** from overseas between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, with a strong European component.
- **Intra-regional migration**, influenced by socio-economic developments and structural factors, particularly during 1970 to 1990, which saw high rates of migration within Latin America.

- **South-North migration flows**, resulting in the loss of qualified workers in LAC, the emergence of immigrant communities and the development of an economic potential associated with the remittances sent by migrants to countries of origin.

Since 2010, no single region has experienced a greater relative increase in international migration than LAC. The number of migrants living in the region nearly doubled between 2010 and 2023, a dramatic shift driven by a series of displacement crises, free-movement arrangements, and former emigrants returning with foreign-born children and spouses, among other trends (Selee et al., 2023).

The World Development Report (2023) comments that in LAC, two main trends are evident, **relatively large movements occur within the region** (about 10.7 million people), including the 4.4 million people who left República Bolivariana de Venezuela (here after, Venezuela). **Additionally, a large number of people originating from the region have emigrated, mainly to North America** (about 60%) and, to a much lesser extent, to the European Union (about 10%) (WDR, 2023: 48).

Figure 1: Cross-border movement in the LAC



Source: [World Development Report, 2023: 50](#) Reproduced under [CC BY 3.0 IGO](#)

The World Bank (2023) note that if regions currently afflicted with war or armed conflict are excluded, then **Latin America is the region where most people migrate internationally.** Alongside long-term established regular and labour migration patterns, LAC migration has four contemporary characteristics (World Bank, 2023: 33-34):

- **For decades the LAC region has witnessed extensive mixed migration.** Most Central American migrants (or others displaced across borders) reside in the USA, with increasing numbers in Mexico, Canada, Spain, and the Dominican Republic. The characteristics of these movements are changing, and increasingly involve large numbers of vulnerable populations.
- **Venezuelan migration is increasingly relevant for Central American countries.** Data from the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V) shows that by September 2022, 144,545 were in Panama, and 30,107 were in Costa Rica. By August 2022, over 150,000 Venezuelans had arrived at the southern border of the USA seeking protection.
- **Haitians are migrating in significant numbers following disasters, conflict outbreaks, extreme poverty, and political instability.** These trends have accelerated after the assassination of President Moïse and the earthquake that devastated the country both in 2021.

- **Since 2015, extra-regional migratory flows have intensified.** These include highly vulnerable people from Africa, Asia and other regions who come through the Darien Gap, passing through Central America on their way north to the USA.

Box 1: Terminology

Migrant: a person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions.

Emigrant: a person who leaves their own country in order to settle permanently in another.

Immigrant: a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.

Forced Migration: According to IOM, **forced migration** is “a migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion, or coercion.”

Asylum Seeker: According to UNHCR, **asylum-seekers** are “individuals who have sought international protection and whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined”

Refugee: According to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol **refugees** are persons who flee their country due to "well-founded fear" of persecution due to reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and who are outside of their country of nationality or permanent residence and due to this fear are unable or unwilling to return to it.

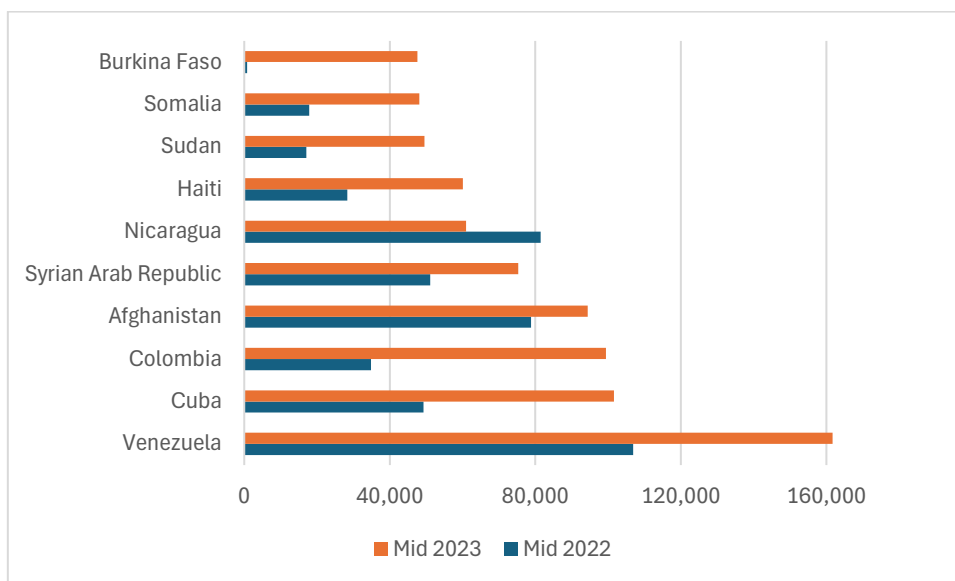
Mixed Migration: Mixed movement (also called **mixed migration** or mixed flow) is “a movement in which a number of people are travelling together, generally in an irregular manner, using the same routes and means of transport, but for different reasons.

A particular feature of contemporary migration in the LAC region is the impact that protracted crises on particular countries have on migrant flows. For example, the crisis in Venezuela has generated significant displacement of people, at the same time, there is a large and growing population of Haitians that have migrated to South America, and large numbers are moving from the Northern Triangle of Central America into Mexico and towards the United States, and from Nicaragua into Costa Rica.

UNHCR (2021) reported that by June 2021, over 15.7 million people in LAC will be migrants and forcibly displaced, accounting for 19.2% of the world’s forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR 2021), having doubled in size over the previous 20 years.

Data from 2023 highlights that five of the top ten source countries for new asylum applications globally are in the LAC region, with asylum seekers often passing through Central America (see figure 1 and UNHCR, 2023). Of these, a significant portion are either already considered or could soon be considered to be in need of international protection (World Bank, 2023: 38).

Figure 2: Largest source countries for new asylum applications globally - 2022 -2023¹



Source: Author’s own based on data from [UNHCR \(2023: 24\)](#)

2.1 Drivers of migration

Migrants report that the main reasons for migrating include improving their income, escaping violence, reuniting with family members, and recovering from the impact of recurring disasters and extreme weather events (IFRC 2022). The devastating socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and continuing political crises are also factors that may continue to increase population movements. Despite its multifactorial nature, four common factors appear distinctly in the literature as key drivers affecting mixed migration flows.

Climate change and disasters

Climate-related hazards like floods, storms, and wildfires are already a major driver of global human mobility. In many parts of the world, climate change is increasing these impacts. Climate-related impacts trigger migration and internal displacement, especially among the most vulnerable. Climate change impacts are linked to household-level liquidity constraints that trigger migration, mainly due to hydrometeorological events (World Bank, 2023).

Environmental change and disasters are influencing human movement and displacement in the subregion. Intense weather-related events – including tropical storms and hurricanes – directly and indirectly impact migration in the subregion. Hurricane Laura triggered more than a million displacements across the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba and

¹ Note: Due to limitations on available data, immigration numbers for each region include all of foreign nationals; emigration numbers include foreign-born people (including naturalized). EAP = East Asia and Pacific; ECA = Europe and Central Asia (including Western Europe); GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council (countries); HICs = high-income countries; LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; NA = North America; SA = South Asia; SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa

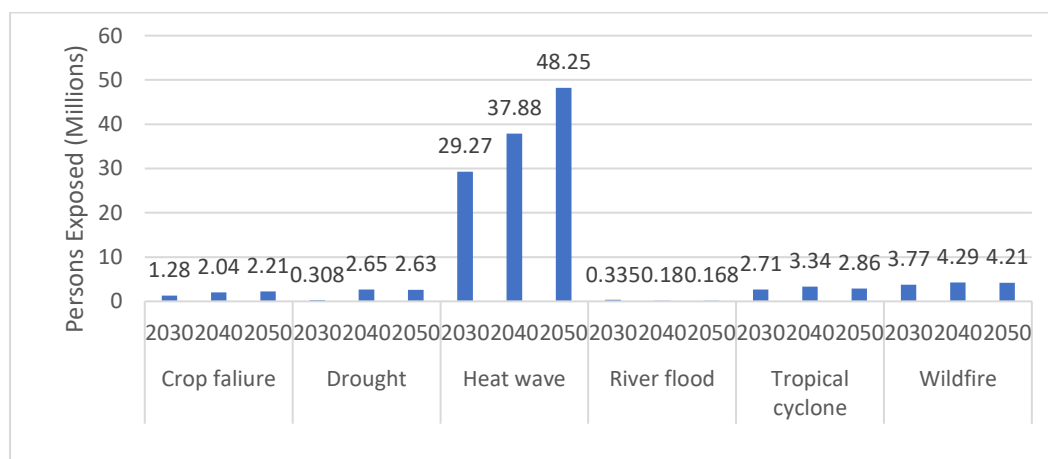
the United States in 2020, while Hurricanes Eta and Iota resulted in around 1.7 million displacements in several countries in the subregion (IOM, 2021: 107).

In Central America, environmental shocks in pre-mountain zones range from floods and storms, mudslides and landslides, while arid areas are mostly affected by droughts. In Guatemala, it is common for people to migrate due to the droughts and floods that damage crops and consequently cause food insecurity and poverty (IOM, 2021: 107). To further address the challenge of climate change and migration, several countries in Central America and the Caribbean are incorporating migration and mobility into their climate strategies. For example, Guatemala’s climate strategy includes a focus on human mobility, while Mexico’s new Nationally Determined Contribution calls for enhanced attention to climate migration (IOM, 2021).

Most new internal displacements in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2020 were due to disasters, not violence and conflict. Honduras recorded the largest number of internal displacements triggered by natural and manmade disasters (937,000), followed by Cuba (639,000), Brazil (358,000) and Guatemala (339,000). Weather-related events including Hurricane Laura (in August 2020) and Hurricanes Eta and Iota (in November 2020) triggered these large-scale displacements. Colombia and El Salvador recorded the highest number of new internal displacements related to violence and/or conflict in 2020 – 106,000 in Colombia and 114,000 in El Salvador (IOM, 2021: 105).

The Climate Mobility Impacts dashboard by IOM’s Global Data Institute (GDI) visualises where hazard exposure, high population density, and economic vulnerability are projected to coincide in future. These data help identify climate-sensitive hotspots and develop effective anticipatory action to support at-risk communities worldwide. The data highlights that by 2050 48.25 million may be exposed to heat waves.

Figure 3: Persons exposed to various climate related hazards in the Americas in (2030, 2040, 2050)²



Source:

Source: Author’s own based on data from <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/climate-mobility-impacts>

² Region – Latin America and the Caribbean, Climate Scenario: RCP 6.0 (High Warning), Socio-economic scenario: SSP 2 (‘Middle of the Road)

Welfare differentials

Welfare differentials between origin and destination countries are key drivers of migration. National and international inequality, or disparities in living standards between countries of origin and destination, tend to increase migration (World Bank, 2023: 25-26). For example, since 2013, the economy has contracted by 75% and inflation in 2021 is expected to reach 1,800%. Close to 80% of the population is in poverty and around two-thirds are malnourished (Sabatini & Wallace, 2021).

Violence

High and chronic levels of violence remain drivers of migration. However, the direction and magnitude of these effects differ according to the incidence and prevalence of violence. Violence hinders labour mobility domestically (while extortion hinders investment and growth) and causes waves of migration with a snowball effect (World Bank, 2023).

A negative aspect to this migration is that some young people joined gangs in the US so many were imprisoned and then deported back to central America, effectively opening branches of the US gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (World Bank, 2023). Gangs such as MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) in Central America infiltrated the states and unleashed waves of violent crime.

Politics is also affected, with the current president of Honduras accused of taking bribes from famed drug trafficker El Chapo, while his brother had his own 'brand' of cocaine.

Much of the crime and violence is driven by US drug consumption. Drug traffic to the US passes from Colombia and Peru through central America, enriching and empowering these gangs and deepening corruption in the states.

Migrant networks

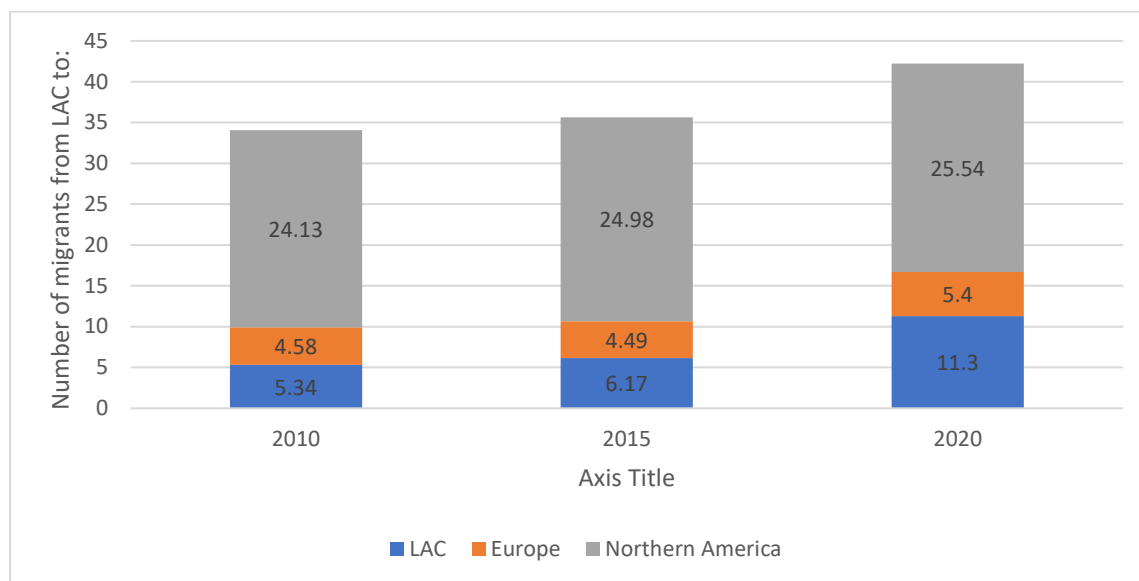
Family and community social networks are primary drivers of migration in Central America (World Bank, 2023). The World Bank (2023) also flags that bilateral donor aid is associated with more robust personal and business networks between the giving and receiving countries, increasing migration flows to the donor country.

3. Migrant numbers

While estimates of migrant numbers can be challenging to ascertain, and change over time, efforts to enumerate migration from, within and to LAC have been made consistently over the years. IOM highlight that there are limitations in the data collection which was performed in different hours, days, weeks and months; and for the government data, different data collection methodologies are used. UNDESA note that over the past few decades, migration flows have changed significantly in terms of size, direction, general characteristics and overall impact in countries of origin and host countries alike.

The following figure uses data from UNDESA to provide an overview of changes in migration patterns for the region between 2010 and 2020. Overall, the total number of migrants from LAC increased from ~34 million in 2010 to ~42 million in 2020.

Figure 4: Growth of Migration within Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: Author's own based on data from [United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division](#).

Migration within the LAC region experienced a dramatic increase of 83.2%, from 5.3 million to 11.3 million. Migration to North America, the primary destination for migrants from the LAC region (with 25.5 million migrants in 2020), slowed down considerably (2.2% in 2020), while migration to Europe rebounded after a temporary decrease. This trends in migration have been driven by factors such as stricter immigration regulations in the United States, economic growth in various LAC countries, and an increase in migration from Venezuela since 2015 (UNDP, 2023).

Regular migration within the LAC region

Given ongoing issues in Venezuela as well as disasters in other countries in LAC, traditional countries of emigration have become host to large numbers of immigrants (IADB, 2021). The total number of residence permits granted to regular migrants to the countries of LAC reached 1.41 million in 2019, a decline from over 2 million in 2018, but still more than 50% higher than the 2015-16 average. The surge in migrants in 2017-2019 has been driven principally by the massive exodus of Venezuelans, moving primarily to other Andean countries, but with significant numbers going to other countries as well. In the past three years, the average number of migrants in LAC has been more than 70% above the average for 2015-16 (IADB, 2021: 15).

Over the past five years Chile has granted the largest number of permits to migrants, accounting for 27% of permits granted in the region, for an average of over 350,000 per year over the 2015-2019 period. Next is Argentina, having issued 17% of residence permits in the region to an average of nearly 220,000 immigrants per year in the same period, followed by Colombia with 14%, while Mexico and Brazil each gave permits to an average of around 110,000 people per year (around 10% each) and Peru and Ecuador accounted for 9% and 5% of the aggregate, respectively.

Refugee country of origin

The number of asylum-seekers and refugees from LAC has increased significantly in recent years. UNHCR (2022) reported that by December 2022, the number of asylum-seekers and refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras worldwide has reached 665,200. Further to this, Mexico ranks among the top receiving countries of asylum applications in the world, with 118,800 new asylum claims (as of December 2022).

UNHCR (2022a) comment that by mid-2022, 42% of new asylum applications in the world were made by nationals of LAC countries. Colombia was the country hosting the second-largest number of refugees and other people in need of international protection globally, with a total of 2.5 million Venezuelans. The 2023-2024 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP)Link is external estimates 5 million in-destination Venezuelans will need humanitarian, protection and socioeconomic assistance in 2023 (UNHCR, 2022a).

Table 1: Top 5 LAC countries of origin for refugees under UNHCR's mandate

Country of origin	Refugees under UNHCR's mandate	Asylum-seekers	IDPs of concern to UNHCR	Other people in need of international protection	Stateless persons	Host Community	Others of concern
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	300759	1184889	0	5322120	0	0	3354830
Haiti	116463	195425	0	-	0	0	37482
Colombia	111394	220456	6886426	-	0	876000	542773
Honduras	72341	209130	247090	-	0	0	146089
El Salvador	62248	142469	71500	-	0	49305	24625

Source: Author's own based on data from [UNHCR Refugee Data Finder](#)

3.1 Migration from LAC

The World Bank (2023) note that **the intention and decision to migrate depend on multiple interconnected factors**, a combination of drivers and family, individual, school, and community risk factors, with different degrees of influence, appear to explain the desire to migrate.

In previous decades, discussions pertaining to migration, typically concerned sending countries in LAC and receiving countries in the global North. Contemporary discussions reflect the impact of intra-regional movement with almost all countries in LAC wrestling with issues of immigration and humanitarian protection (Selee et al., 2023).

Emigration remains a significant feature in LAC with IOM (2021: 99-100) estimating that over 11 million people from the region lived abroad in 2020. Mexico continues to be the country in the region with the most emigrants with the majority living in the United States.

Mexico is followed by Venezuela and Colombia, with over 5 million and more than 3 million emigrants, respectively (IOM, 2021: 99-100).

As a percentage of population, Jamaica has the largest emigrant population, followed by El Salvador and Venezuela. In 2020, Argentina was home to the largest foreign-born population in the region (with over 2 million migrants), mainly from neighbouring countries such as Paraguay and Bolivia. Colombia had the second largest number of immigrants, followed by Chile. Among the top migrant countries, Costa Rica had the largest immigrant share of its population (10%), closely followed by Chile (IOM, 2021: 99-100).

3.2 Migration to LAC

The total number of migrants from other regions living in LAC has remained relatively stable, at around 3 million during the previous three decades. These were comprised mostly of Europeans (whose numbers have declined slightly over the period) and Northern Americans, whose numbers have increased (IOM, 2021: 99-100). In 2020, the numbers of Europeans and Northern Americans living in Latin America and the Caribbean stood at around 1.4 million and 1.3 million, respectively. Meanwhile, around 11 million migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean originated from other countries in the region.

3.3 Migration routes

The mixed migration flows in Latin America and the Caribbean are dynamic and often intersect; most countries are simultaneously points of origin, transit, destination, and return (UNICEF, 2023). The LAC region is characterised primarily by intra-regional movements. Mixed migration movements in LAC gained global attention between 2017 and 2018, when the number of migrants from Venezuela sharply increased and affected virtually every country in the region.

There are two primary trajectories – from the central American ‘northern triangle’ countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala across Mexico to the US, and from Venezuela to neighbouring South American nations and locations such as Spain and the Caribbean. These migrations are mainly the results of failing states, limited – or in the case of Venezuela, loss of – economic opportunity, crime, and violence (World Bank, 2023).

IADB (2021) analysis of migration from LAC noted that overall intra-regional flows accounted for 84% of total inflows over the five-year period, with a strong positive trend as the average rose from 70% in 2015 and 2016 to 85% in 2017 through 2019, peaking at 90% in 2018 (IADB, 2021: 21).

Migrant caravans, a term used to describe the cross-border movement of large groups of people by land, have increased in number and frequency since 2018 and have often included families with children (IOM, 2021).

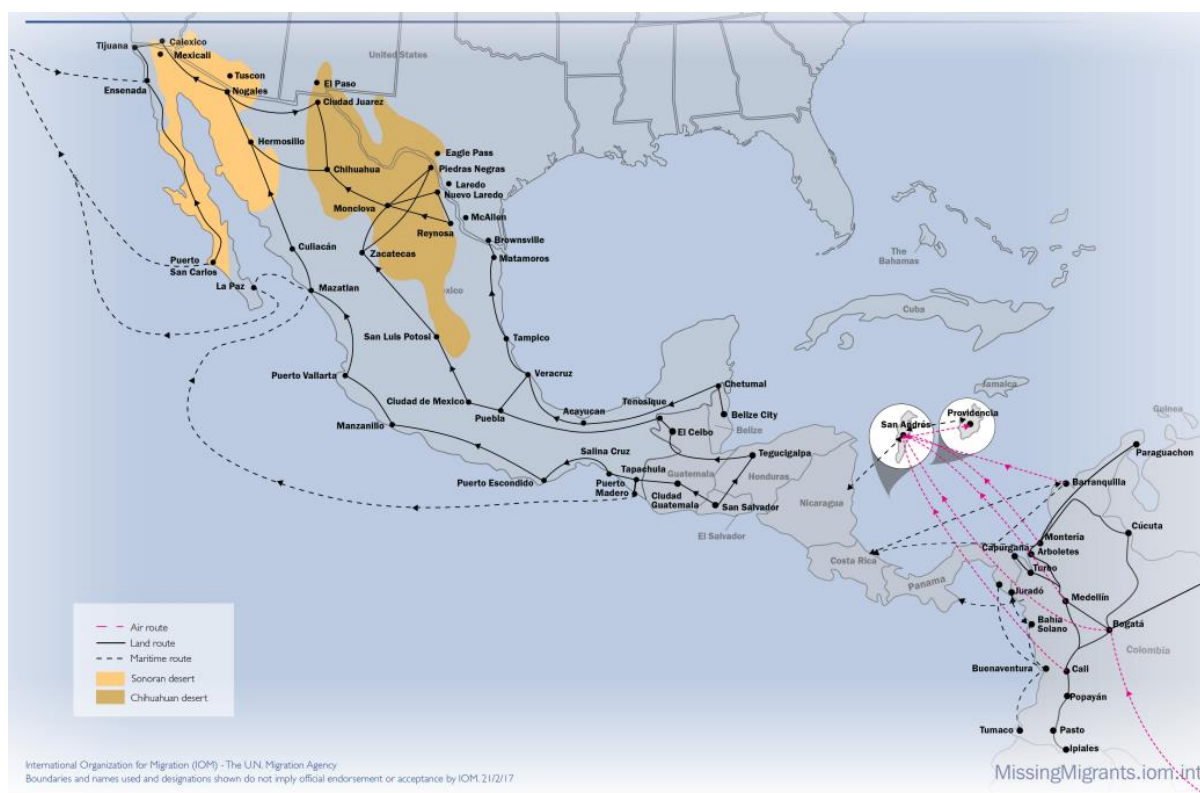
The corridor from Latin America to the southern border of the United States through the Darien Gap and Central America is primarily used by irregular migrants originating from LAC, although there are increasing numbers of distressed migrants from other parts of the world being reported on this route (WDR, 2023). The share of

children and unaccompanied minors along this corridor has fluctuated according to the US policies affecting undocumented migrants' families (WDR, 2023: 249).

The Darien Gap is an area of tropical rainforest that extends across both sides of the border between Colombia and Panama. It lacks infrastructure and is heavily controlled by criminal groups, exposing those in transit to risks of death and abuse (Mixed Migration Centre, 2024).

Mixed migration through the Darien Gap is reported to be increasing. While 248,284 people on the move crossed this border irregularly in 2022, the number rose to 520,085 by 2023 (+110%). In 2023, 63% of the migrants who crossed the Darien Gap were of Venezuelan nationality, 17% from other South American countries, 9% from Caribbean islands, 8% from Asia, and 2% from Africa (Mixed Migration Centre, 2024: 1).

Figure 5: Mixed migration routes (Americas)



Source: © International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2018

Specifically reflecting on refugees and migrants from Venezuela, IOM (nd – a) note that those compelled to leave use diverse routes to reach their destination including by land, plane and sea. More people are taking sea routes than in years prior too – taking short maritime routes toward neighbouring Caribbean islands (IOM, nd1).

Covid-19 impacts on migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted migration and mobility in Central America and the Caribbean, while also exacerbating existing vulnerabilities among

migrants, including those in transit. Border closures and other movement restrictions due to COVID-19 resulted in the decline in the number of migrants from the subregion heading north in the early weeks and months following the onset of the pandemic (IOM, 2021: 106).

Many migrants either postponed their journeys or were left stuck in transit. The pandemic and related restrictions also forced some migrants to take even more dangerous journeys, including through the Darién Gap, considered one of the most perilous migration routes globally (IOM, 2021: 106).

IOM (2021) reports that despite restrictions on mobility due to the pandemic, the use of smugglers continued in the subregion. In addition to disrupting asylum processes and other resettlement programmes across several countries in the subregion, mobility restrictions forced many migrants to stay in makeshift camps in inadequate hygiene conditions, with limited supply of food and water. For example, in Panama's Darién province, many irregular migrants, including those from within and outside the subregion such as Africans, Cubans and Haitians, were left stranded as several countries closed their borders.

3.4 Migrant origins

As noted above, the mixed migration flows in LAC are dynamic and often intersect with most countries simultaneously points of origin, transit, destination, and return (UNICEF, 2023).

Central America

At the end of 2020, more than 867,800 people originating from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras remained forcibly displaced, almost 80,000 more than at the end of 2019. Since 2018, Nicaragua has also seen a sharp increase in cross-border human mobility as conditions in the country continue to deteriorate (World Bank, 2023: 21).

At the end of 2020, around 450,000 people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were seeking asylum in other countries.

Official projections in Costa Rica, a primary destination for recent Nicaraguan migrants and refugees, estimate over 200,000 pending asylum cases by the end of 2022 (representing over 9,000 appointments per month and 5% of the total population). The rapid increase in the volume of migrants in the region implies a significant burden on national and local authorities, humanitarian agencies, and border communities to handle the population in transit as well as those who establish themselves permanently in these areas (World Bank, 2023: 21).

Venezuela

The ongoing Venezuelan situation has had a significant impact on migration flows in the region and remains one of the largest displacement and migration crises worldwide. Hidalgo et al. (2021: 5) reported that between 2015 and 2021, approximately 5.4 million Venezuelans had left the country, and roughly 85% moved to another country in LAC. Colombia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador and Brazil are some of the main destination countries of Venezuelan refugees and migrants within the region. More recent estimates provided by

the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (2023) reported that in 2023 there were almost 8 million refugees from the country.

Table 2: Key figures on refugees and migrants from Venezuela (August 2023)

Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela	Residence Permits and Regular Stay Granted	Total Pending Asylum Claims	Recognised Refugees from Venezuela
7,722,579	4,485,470	1,184,889	300,759

Source: Author’s own based on data from [Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela](#)

The United Nations Refugee Agency identifies “Venezuelans displaced abroad” as a separate category to reflect the ongoing displacement crisis; this category does not include Venezuelan asylum seekers and refugees. By the end of 2020, there were approximately 171,000 registered refugees from Venezuela and nearly 4 million Venezuelans displaced without formal refugee status. Approximately 73% of refugees and migrants seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Colombia continues to host the majority of Venezuelan refugees and migrants (more than 1.7 million) (IOM, 2021).

Caribbean

According to IOM (2021: 106), migration dynamics in the Caribbean remain largely characterised by emigration, although recent arrivals of Venezuelan refugees and migrants has added to the complexities in the subregion. Most international migrants from the Caribbean are extra regional migrants, with North America (largely the United States) and Europe the two key destination regions. Some of the largest corridors are between Cuba and the United States as well as the Dominican Republic and the United States. While intraregional migration remains relatively low, it has also increased steadily over time, and by mid-2020 there were almost 860,000 international migrants from within the subregion, nearly doubling since 1990 (IOM, 201: 106).

3.5 Migrant destinations

North America

Migration northward remains a significant trend, with mixed migration from the northern region of Central America, in particular, proving to be challenging and dynamic due to rising immigration controls. Migration from and through Central America is driven by a complex set of factors, including economic insecurity, violence, crime and the effects of climate change, with many individuals moving northward in pursuit of financial and human security (IOM, 2021).

IOM (nd) report that migration to North America is a key feature in the LAC region with over 25 million migrants residing in North America. The LAC population living in Northern America increased from an estimated 10 million in 1990.

Europe

A further 5 million migrants from the region resided in Europe in 2020. While this number has only slightly increased since 2015, the number of migrants from LAC living in Europe more than quadrupled since 1990. Other regions, such as Asia and Oceania, were home to a very small number of migrants from LAC in 2020 (over 400,000 and 200,000 migrants, respectively) (IOM, nd – a).

Caribbean

There has also been a significant increase in immigration to some Caribbean countries, driven in large part by the arrival of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Around 100,000 Venezuelans lived in the Caribbean in September 2019, but by the end of 2021 the number of Venezuelans is expected to grow to more than 220,000 (IOM, 2021: 106). Some of the main destinations for Venezuelans include the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Curaçao. By August 2020, more than 100,000 Venezuelans resided in the Dominican Republic, representing over 1% of the total population. In places such as Aruba and Curaçao, Venezuelan migrants make up a significant share of the population (more than 10%) (IOM, 2021: 107). In response to the growing presence of Venezuelans in the Caribbean, regularisation programmes are being adopted by, for example, Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic and Curaçao to provide legal status to applicable Venezuelans.

South America

While historically Argentina has been the primary destination of intra-regional migration, and issued the largest number of permits in 2015, in the subsequent four years it has been overtaken by Chile and Colombia, and by Peru in the last two years, all of which have taken in large numbers of Venezuelan migrants. Other principal destinations, including Brazil and Mexico, have also issued residence permits to growing numbers of intra-regional migrants (IADB, 2021).

Destination choice of migrants is often influenced by the experiences of past migrant journeys and the extent of existing migrant communities. For example, between 2015 and 2019 (IADB, 2021: 21-22):

- the most common intraregional destination of Colombian emigrants is Chile, which granted 250,000 permits to Colombians over the five years. Together with Ecuador, Argentina, and Brazil the four countries account for 80% of total intra-regional Colombian emigrants.
- emigrants from Peru went almost exclusively to Chile (62%) and Argentina (22%) over the past five years. The remainder went to the other Andean countries, as well as Brazil and Mexico.

- around 70% of Haitian migrants to mainland Latin America in the past five years have gone to Chile – circa 300,000 permits – along with nearly 20,000 Dominicans. Over 100,000 Haitians obtained permits in Brazil in the period, representing another quarter of this population of migrants.
- Around 2-3 million Venezuelan refugees are in Colombia with many being educated and many bringing families (Sabatini & Wallace, 2021). Despite putting tremendous strain on Colombia’s social safety net, labour markets, education system and politics, Sabatini & Wallace (2021) reflect that Colombia has done a good job of accommodating this enormous influx and planning their integration. Venezuelans have also travelled in large numbers to other parts of South America such as Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile as well as to Spain and the Caribbean.

4. Broader issues associated with migration in LAC

4.1 Anti-migration sentiment

Large migratory flows and forced displacement can profoundly affect social cohesion among and between displaced persons, host communities, and communities to which displaced persons return. Forced displacement may undermine or strengthen social cohesion through several mechanisms, including the trauma or mobilization effects of the displacement experience and the impact of population inflows on goods, services, markets, jobs, and the environment (World Bank, 2023: 96)

UNDP (2023) report that short-term costs and negative impacts on certain population groups, coupled with misinformation and prejudice, can lead to strong anti-migration attitudes in the region. Citing Latinobarómetro 2020, they highlight that perceptions of LAC countries towards migrants is varied. In most countries, about 50% of the population consider it positive or very positive to receive Latin American immigrants, except in the Dominican Republic, where pro-migration attitudes are even higher. Additionally, there is a prevalent concern about increasing crime rates due to immigration, with two-thirds of the population in the region agreeing or strongly agreeing that migration leads to higher crime.

While for the most part LAC countries have shown solidarity with migrants, the unprecedented scale of the flows in many countries has led to new challenges for the integration of these populations into the economies and societies of the destination countries, as well as putting a strain on limited infrastructure and social services unprepared to accommodate the numbers of new arrivals (IADB, 2021).

According to the World Bank (2023), xenophobia in Central America and the Dominican Republic rises with the share of immigrants as a percentage of the overall population. The intensity of negative attitudes toward migration in the region also reflects historical tensions between host and migrant populations. There is dissonance between top-down narratives from government and political leaders and bottom-up narratives that spread through person-to-person contact, media, and social media channels (World Bank, 2023).

4.2 Migration of children

There has been a rise in the number of children journeying through the Darién Gap. Of the 226,000 migrants from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador arriving at the United States border in the first half of fiscal year 2021, approximately 34,000 were unaccompanied minors (IOM, 2021: 106).

4.3 Remittances versus brain drain

Since 2015, the number of international migrants residing in the countries of LAC has increased by over 50%. This dramatic surge has brought about a qualitative change in the way that countries in the region think about migration. In recent decades, with few exceptions migration in LAC was primarily a matter of migrants leaving the region to seek work in developed countries. In terms of economic development, migration was primarily an issue of balancing “brain drain” and remittances (IADB, 2021: 9).

Remittance flows to the LAC reached almost USD 104 billion in 2020, the highest recorded to date and an increase of 6.5% from 2019, having remained more resilient than any other region in the world (IOM, 2021: 102). In 2020, Mexico was the world’s third largest remittance-receiving country after India and China and by far the largest recipient in the region (USD 43 billion) (IOM, 2021: 102). Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and El Salvador were among the top five remittance recipient countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, although their inflows were much smaller than Mexico’s. As a percentage of GDP, however, the top five remittance-receiving countries in the region in 2020 were El Salvador (at 24%), followed by Honduras (24%), Haiti (22%), Jamaica (21%) and Nicaragua (15%) (IOM, 2021: 202).

The 10 largest recipients in the region, except Haiti, experienced an increase of nearly 8% on average compared to 2019. Several factors contributed to this increase, including the shift from informal to formal remittance-sending channels, the economic stimulus packages in the United States in response to the pandemic, and the continued employment of migrants in essential sectors in destinations (IOM, 2021: 202).

4.4 Positive impact of migration

Whilst new migration flows within LAC are seen to pose challenges for governments and host communities, they also present an opportunity for the region’s development. With intraregional migration contributing to regional integration, economic development, and innovation, as well as expanded productivity (WDR, 2023). Evidence has shown that established migration corridors can intensify migration, with migrant networks reducing the costs and cultural barriers involved (UNDP, 2023).

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6. About this review

6.1 Suggested citation

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6.2 Review overview

This Knowledge for Development and Diplomacy (K4DD) Rapid Evidence Review is based on 6 days of desk-based research. The K4DD research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development.

Rapid Evidence Reviews are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

K4DD services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with the University of Birmingham, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI), Association of Commonwealth Universities, and Royal United Service Institute (RUSI).

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7. Annex 1

7.1 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Data³

The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) is IOM's global methodology for monitoring and tracking migrant and displaced populations in order to analyse trends in migratory flows. The DTM data presented below was collected between October 2022 and January 2024 in different locations in Central America and Mexico.

IOM highlight that the total data should not be interpreted as a regional trend, representing only an approximation of the data. For the DTM data there are limitations in the data collection which was performed in different hours, days, weeks and months; and for the government data, different data collection methodologies are used.

Survey data collected between October 2022 and January 2024 involving 32,765 surveys (19,342 male and 13,423 female participants)

All tables are author's own based on data from **IOM DTM**

Demographic profile

Table 3: Marital status of migrant and displaced populations

Single	50%
Married/Civil Union	46%
Divorced/Separated	3%
Widowed	1%

Average age is 31

Table 4: Sex and age of migrant and displaced populations

Age	Male	Female
56-65	1%	0%
46-55	4%	2%
35-45	12%	8%

³ <https://rosanjose.iom.int/en/interactive-dashboard-migrants-transit-through-americas>

26-35	26%	19%
18-25	16%	12%

Table 5: Main nationalities identified of migrant and displaced populations

Country	%
The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela	59%
Honduras	15%
Ecuador	6%
Haiti	5%
Colombia	5%
Cuba	3%
Mexico	3%
Guatemala	2%
El Salvador	1%

Table 6: Education level of migrant and displaced populations

University	11%
Technical Education	11%
Secondary Education	57%
Primary Education	18%
No Education	3%

Groups of travel

Table 7: Persons travelling alone and accompanied (by type of companion) of migrant and displaced populations

With Relatives	Alone	With non-Relatives	With Relatives and non-Relatives
54%	30%	10%	7%

Table 8: Number of persons per travel group (including the person surveyed) of migrant and displaced populations

1	2	3	4	5	6-10	11-15	16+
10%	12%	17%	17%	13%	23%	6%	2%

Origin and destination

Table 9: Time elapsed since beginning the journey of migrant and displaced populations

More than four weeks	25%
Four weeks ago,	8%
Three weeks ago,	18%
Two weeks ago,	22%
One week ago,	27%

Table 10: Habitual residence country (last 12 months) of migrant and displaced populations

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela	39
Colombia	22
Ecuador	12

Honduras	7
Chile	7
Peru	6
Brazil	3
Cuba	2
Guatemala	1
Haiti	1

Table 11: Final Destination Country of migrant and displaced populations

The United States of America	90%
Mexico	8%
Canada	2%

Table 12: Alternative destination country of migrant and displaced populations

Doesn't have a defined destination	47%
Mexico	25%
Canada	17%
Costa Rica	6%
The United States	5%

Intention to return

Table 13: Intention to return to the country of origin of migrant and displaced populations

Yes	25%
No	75%

Table 14: Needs to be satisfied for returning of migrant and displaced populations

Increasing safety	20%
Access to employment	20%
Access to livelihoods	18%
Housing support and assistance	13%
Humanitarian assistance	12%
Education opportunities	11%
Other reasons	6%