

The Venezuelan Migration Crisis in a Time of COVID-19

Growing concerns over the rise of Coronavirus in Latin America and the region's new status as the "[epicenter](#)" of the pandemic has increased fears over the spread of the virus. Brazil leads Latin America with the highest number of COVID-19 cases with over 3.7 million confirmed infections, with Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile as the other hardest-hit countries in the region.

As the pandemic continues to dominate life in Latin America, millions of Venezuelan migrants are particularly hard hit and often find themselves trapped during this time of crisis. The majority of the Venezuelan migrant population is now living precisely in the countries where COVID-19 cases have soared: Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Brazil.

Since 2015, almost 15% of Venezuela's population has fled the country due to a humanitarian crisis that has left millions without access to food, income, security, and basic necessities because of power shortages. Amounting to [over 4 million people](#), the Venezuela migration crisis has become the largest mass displacement in the region and the second largest in the world, second only to the Syrian refugee exodus.

Venezuela has become a unique case in migration history. From a country of immigrants, with large populations of Colombian, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish immigrants, it has become a country of emigrants. Over a million left during Chavez's tenure in office (1998-2013), particularly its third and fourth presidential terms when the economic and political situation worsened. Most of these came from the upper and middle-class who could afford to leave by plane. These included professionals, many connected to PDVSA, the nationalized petroleum industry, who had enough capital to begin a new life abroad. The post-Chavez wave dwarfed previous departures and became a multiclass phenomenon. Those who could afford it continued to fly out. The vast majority consisted of people with lower levels of material and human capital and travelled by foot and bus, many with no regular status. This most current wave has the most desperate need for aid and regulation, as this is also the most vulnerable and the poorest population to flee.¹

¹ Cited from a June 18, 2020 conversation and interview with Professor Alexandra Urán, Professor of Anthropology at la Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia. Professor Urán does field work on the Venezuelan migration crisis in Colombia and the experiences of women, children, and families.

[Insert Map 1]

The majority of the overland wave has entered Colombia through [popular crossing points](#), across bridges that connect the two countries. Cúcuta, is the largest of these, with many crossing from Táchira in Venezuela with the hopes of either remaining in Cúcuta (where Venezuelans make up between [16 and 38%](#) of the population) or continuing on to Bogota, Medellin, or even farther across international borders into Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, Brazil, and to a lesser extent Guyana, account for the other exit points. (Map 1).

[Insert Map 2]

Map 2 shows the top destinations for Venezuelan migrants in Latin America: Colombia, with largest number (1,764,883) followed by Peru (829,708), Chile (455,494), Ecuador (362,857), Brazil (264,617), Argentina (179,069) Panama ([94,000](#)), Mexico ([46,000](#)), and Costa Rica ([40,000](#)). Other significant populations outside the region include Spain ([383,501](#)), Italy ([53,007](#)), and the United States ([394,000](#)). Graph 1 shows the significance of Venezuelan migration in top migrant destination countries.

[Insert Graph 1]

With many not registered internationally and officially as refugees, Venezuelans fleeing often find themselves in situations where they possess no legal status to remain in the country they arrive to. Under the [Cartagena Declaration](#), refugees in Latin America can fit into the designation as anyone having “fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.” With these qualifications, one would think that Venezuelan migrants fit into the category of “refugees,” but instead the majority of them find themselves with no status.

While Venezuelans arriving throughout Latin America rarely have a visa or a permit for permanent residence, those leaving for European countries often hold dual citizenship. In Italy, over [65%](#) of Venezuelan migrants hold both a Venezuelan and an Italian passport, gained by either birth or through ancestry from Italian parents or grandparents. In Spain, which in 2020 has the largest number of Venezuelans (383,501) in Europe, most also have either Spanish or other European Union citizenship (find out the % as you did for Italy. By contrast, those entering Latin American countries, more often than not do so with no residency permit and the majority [do not even have their Venezuelan passport](#) with them due to the challenge present in the country to renew these.

Some countries with large influxes of Venezuelan migrants, such as Colombia where an estimated 1.8 million Venezuelans now reside, have created special permits for Venezuelans to stay and work in the country. The “Permiso Especial de Permanencia” (“special residency permit”) or the “PEP” was created in 2015 by the Colombian government to respond to the large influx of Venezuelans requesting protection. The [PEP](#) allows Venezuelans that have been in Colombia since or before November 29, 2019 and fulfill the other requirements to obtain permission to work in the country with no restrictions: applicants must have entered Colombia with a stamped passport, must not have a judicial record, must not have an deportation order in force, and they must be currently living in Colombia. Venezuelans who do not meet the date criteria and find themselves in an irregular legal status in Colombia can also apply for the “Permiso Especial de Permanencia para el Fomento de la Formalización” (“special residency permit for the promotion of formalization) or “[PEPFF](#)” if they possess either a job hiring offer in the national territory, by an employer, or an offer to contract the provision of services in the national territory, by a contractor.” This permit grants them the same freedoms and rights as the PEP but is expanded to specifically target those informal workers with job offers, especially those that arrived after November 29, 2019. Out of all the Latin American countries, Colombia has been regarded as the most [generous](#) to Venezuelans due to the ease of the process to access this legal status. And in the large scope, very few nations are actually expelling Venezuelans, rather most have created some sort of legal status for Venezuelans to stay.

Chile has the third-largest population of Venezuelan migrants, with over 455,000 living in the country. In response to this large influx, the Chilean government created the “[Visa de Responsabilidad Democrática](#)” (the “Democratic Responsibility Visa”) in 2018 to grant Venezuelans a legal status to remain. Since June 2019, the VRD is able to be applied for and granted in any Chilean consulate out of the country. The visa, which costs \$30USD, and accepts either a valid or expired Venezuelan passport for the application, permits Venezuelan citizens to remain in Chile for a period of up to one year with a legal residency status and can be extended for an additional 12 months thereafter. If there were to be an extraordinary case in which a VRD would not be approved, Venezuelan citizens can also apply for “salvoconductos,” which grant them emergency temporary residency in Chile. Another initiative carried out by the Chilean government has been the implementation of a “Humanitarian Returns Plan.” The plan, which would fully fund repatriation flights for migrants, including Venezuelans, to their home country, included a restriction that would prohibit any migrant that left Chile on one of these “[humanitarian flights](#)” from returning to the country for nine years, which was quickly struck down by the Chilean court of appeals. These flights are reported to be taking other immigrants, including those from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba and Haiti, in addition to Venezuela, back to their home countries. Despite these implementations of laws to supposedly encourage Venezuelans to apply for legal status in Chile, many barriers still exist for Venezuelans to access them. Illegal crossings of Venezuelans into Chile, putting many migrants into dangerous situations and into the possible hands of human traffickers, still occur in significant numbers.

The other unique case in status for Venezuelans has been the recent decision by Brazil to grant refugee status to those fleeing the country. Of all the countries in Latin America, Brazil is the only one to grant Venezuelans any sort of international legal status, with most other nations instating a nationally-recognized legality for Venezuelans to stay and work in the country. Of the now 55,000 individuals recognized as refugees in Brazil, around 46,000 of them are Venezuelan. Other passageways for legal status and entry into Brazil arose out of the closing of borders and blocking of international travel in order to not increase the spread of the virus in the already pandemic-devastated nation. [Executive Order n° 419/2020](#), which was enacted in August 2020, effectively blocked entry into Brazil from any surrounding country due to COVID-19, however exception was made for migrants coming from Venezuela and border closings did not apply to the Venezuela-Brazil border. In August 2020, the Brazilian government also began the fifth installment of payments to informal workers in the Brazilian economy, regardless of legal status. These payments of 600 BRL (120USD) had huge effects on Brazilian informal workers, who make up over [50%](#) of the labor population.

Most Venezuelans find themselves employed in informal labor, even those that have fled the country with secondary-education degrees. When COVID-19 first began to affect Latin America, this informal labor sector was the first severely affected by quarantine and stay-at-home measures. Around [57% of the Venezuelan migrant population](#) in Ecuador is employed in the informal sector and 71% have temporary employment contracts. In Colombia, around [50%](#) of Venezuelan migrants are employed in the informal sector, which includes street vendors, domestic workers, sex workers, and other similar employment.

As of August 4, 2020, Venezuelan medical professionals residing in Peru were [allowed to work in the medical field](#) due to the rise of COVID-19 in the country paired with the shortage of doctors. Like with many other professions, Venezuelan doctors often find themselves working low-wage, often informal jobs upon arrival to their destinations. With no permit to work in Peru and no official claims to residency, the majority of Venezuelan migrants regardless of education find employment in the informal sector.

The initial reasons for migration, other than escaping a humanitarian crisis, included providing for family members that could not leave Venezuela. The effect of the pandemic on remittances has also taken a toll on those left behind. After all, remittances to Venezuela make up the second largest foreign source of earnings after petroleum. Research by the World Bank and The Inter-American Dialogue estimates that COVID-19 will cause a [35% decrease in the amount of remittances](#) sent by migrants back to Venezuela, with some estimating it to be close to 60%. This decrease results from both the severe impact of the pandemic on the informal economy in which

Venezuelans abroad find themselves employed, and to the regulation of the economy under Maduro in the last few years, resulting in less favorable currency exchange rates.

Many Venezuelans see return to their country as their only hope. In a pandemic, Venezuelans are choosing to return even if they run the risk of contagion. Since quarantine measures were put in place in March of 2020, an estimated [80,000 Venezuelans](#) have returned to Venezuela from Colombia, and an estimated 30,000 are still awaiting their return. Prior to COVID-19, over 40,000 Venezuelans and Colombians crossed the international border every day for commerce, work, leisure, and other reasons. But when quarantine measures were implemented in March, the Colombian government [shut down the border](#) with Venezuela, and migrants were forced to find other ways to cross. Many crossed through one of over 80 *trochas*, which are illegal pathways between the two nations. Armed by guerillas and gangs, these irregular crossing points are even more dangerous for migrants who already, not possessing identification or capital, are desperate to leave Venezuela.

During the implementation of quarantine measures, [buses](#) sponsored by the Colombian government and the United Nations would transport Venezuelans that wanted to return back to the Venezuelan-Colombian border from Bogota. Around [1200 buses](#) going from major cities in Colombia to the border transported tens of thousands of migrants returning to Venezuela.

Once they arrive at the border, however, the process of getting back into Venezuela is still quite complicated. Migrants coming into Venezuela must pay for their own COVID-19 tests, and once they are tested, they are mandated to quarantine at the border until they can enter the country. However, in June 2020, the United Nations told the Colombian government to stop encouraging Venezuelans to return to their country due to the possibility of the spread of COVID-19. Despite these new regulations in Colombia, authorities have not stopped Venezuelans wishing to return.²

Yet, in the age of COVID, these returnees did not encounter the “warm welcome” President Maduro had promised in his criticism of like Colombia, Brazil, and Ecuador received large numbers of Venezuelans. Migrants returning to Venezuela report having to spend upwards of [seven days](#) sitting and sleeping on the bus that brought them to the border before they were even let into the country. Men and women are separated, and migrants are forced to sleep on the ground. Since only [1,200 migrants](#) are allowed into Venezuela each day, others are forced to wait in similar buses or in makeshift camps until they return into the country.

² Cited in the CITGO Simon Bolivar Foundation’s Webinar titled “Venezuela’s Escalating Humanitarian Crisis due to COVID-19” that occurred on July 7, 2020.

Reports from Venezuela share that migrants that are able to enter the country from neighboring Latin American nations face severe discrimination from government officials and even face violent repression from Maduro's forces. Maduro has publicly [accused migrants of bringing COVID-19](#) back to Venezuela, and he has deployed military-style forces to enforce quarantine measures. Those thought to have COVID-19 are being detained and blamed for spreading the virus to their community, and labeled as "bioterrorists." Even doctors and nurses that speak out against Maduro's handling of the virus are being jailed for making comments on COVID-19. The National Guard has been tasked with enforcing quarantines for Venezuelan citizens, even publicly shaming those that have avoided official ports of entry and abusing Venezuelans by denying them access to food, water, and medical care. Many in Venezuela report that citizens are refusing access COVID-19 tests because they fear the severe quarantine enforcement they would face if they were to receive a positive COVID test. This is also believed to be contributing to severe undercounting. Those that are getting tested only have few places to receive the virus test, as Maduro has [restricted testing](#) to two centers near Caracas, also a possible explanation for the low number of reported cases.

[Insert Graph 2]

Graph 2 shows suspiciously low number of reported cases of COVID-19 in Venezuela. A country a tattered economy and a crumbling infrastructure, including that related to public health, has a far lower number of cases per capita not only than any other Latin American country, with the equally dubious case of Cuba, but also of hyper-developed places like Sweden and Singapore, as shown in Graph 3. These numbers, while Maduro and other Venezuelan officials disagree, give away more about the status of the pandemic in the country than they may desire.

[Insert Graph 3]

Whatever the actual numbers may be, existing conditions in Venezuela have only been exacerbated by COVID-19. In a country with only [84 ICU beds](#) for a population of over 30 million people, the increase in Coronavirus cases in Venezuela have put even more stress on an already crippling healthcare system. Around 90% of hospitals do not have adequate resources to meet the needs of the country, including running water and electricity. Given these severe conditions, Maduro's government is thought to be [undercounting](#) the number of cases in Venezuela to make it seem like the crisis is under control, and comparative data in Graph 2 suggest the suspicion may embody more than mere anti-Chavismo. This uncertainty of the impact of what is truly going on in Venezuela is a ["big, big concern,"](#) as NPR correspondent Philip Reeves describes it. It has become extremely difficult to track the true impact of COVID-19 on Venezuela and its people since the statistics and information coming from the country has been very doubtful.

Before COVID-19, Maduro had instated “[Plan Vuelta a La Patria](#),” to bring Venezuelans back. In a *Telesur* article, published by a regime-supported agency, he [publicly criticized](#) countries like Colombia and Brazil for supposedly inciting xenophobia against Venezuelans and not protecting them during the pandemic. The plan provided transportation via buses and planes for Venezuelans abroad to come back. According to the Venezuelan government, [23,822 Venezuelans](#) have returned thanks to this plan. When the government implemented quarantine measures in March, it halted the flights and buses. However, the same migrants being told to find refuge from external xenophobia in their homeland find themselves facing worse conditions back home. When they return, many migrants are ostracized or targeted, being blamed for bringing COVID-19 into the country, as Nicolas Maduro claims.

The future for Venezuelan migrants throughout Latin America and other regions of the world is uncertain. With the ongoing crisis of COVID-19 in the region, the already vulnerable state of migrants is met with a pandemic that disproportionately affects poorer communities without longstanding connections and networks. Although limiting the flow of migrants throughout the region may help to curb the spread of the virus, Response for Venezuelans (R4V), the joint United Nations and International Organization on Migration platform for Venezuelan migration, say it can also do much worse. When transportation and migration are halted they in turn also [limit](#) the delivery of public health programs, especially to those in extremely vulnerable situations. Providing an immediate response to the Venezuelan migration crisis in a time of global pandemic is proving to be a difficult feat when so many factors come into play, and this large vulnerable population is living proof of it.