Mixed Movements Monitoring

April - June 2023

Key Figures

5,465
People interviewed between April and June, 2023.

46
Nationalities interviewed

44% VENEZUELANS
25% HONDURANS
7% CUBANS
7% HAITIANS
Main countries of origin of respondents

GUATEMALA: 2,295
MEXICO: 1,940
COSTA RICA: 623
PANAMA: 315
HONDURAS: 292
Number of interviews per country

59% Men

41% Women

31 years
Average age of respondents

Introduction and scope

In recent years, Central America has witnessed a significant upsurge in mixed movements—a term used to describe the cross-border movement of people, generally in an irregular manner, involving individuals and groups who travel alongside each other, using similar routes and means of transport or facilitators, but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have different needs and profiles and may include asylum-seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children, stateless persons, and migrants (including migrants in irregular situations or migrants in vulnerable situations).

With the objective of generating evidence on mixed movements' dynamics in the Americas, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) embarked on a regional monitoring project enabling agencies to better understand trends, profiles and the protection and food security needs of people on the move. Data on mixed movements is key to maintain and expand the ability to lead and actively participate in the multiple forums where mixed movements are discussed within the UN, such as the Issue-Based Coalition on Human Mobility (IBC-HM), and with Governments in the region. As part of UNHCR-WFP joint monitoring efforts, the second round of data collection was conducted between April 1st and June 30th, 2023, in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. This round of data collection was specifically concentrated at border points where mixed movements are most prominent.

Key Findings

1. Three out of every five respondents cited violence-related factors among the primary reasons motivating their decision to leave their country of origin.

2. Notable rise is reported in the diversity of protection incidents, with particular increases in cases of bribery, physical threats, assault, abuse, and fraud.

3. Individuals exposed to protection incidents are more likely to also face challenges related to food security, and vice versa.

4. Food insecurity remains a significant concern along the route. 89% of respondents adopted food-related coping mechanisms in the last 30 days, e.g., eating less, skipping meals, or going without food for whole days.

5. At the Panama-Costa Rica border, food security has further deteriorated compared to the first quarter, with more than half of the respondents (75%) reporting that they consumed just one meal (42%) or did not eat at all during the previous day (33%).

This report covers several key aspects of mixed movements, including the motivation/trigger factors behind the departure from the country of origin or host country, the profiles of people engaged in mixed movements, the journey itself (including protection risks and threats), the situation in the current country (such as documentation, access to territory), food security, and the future intentions of individuals. By examining these factors, the report aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with mixed movements in Central and North America, with the ultimate aim of informing policy and guiding effective humanitarian response efforts.

Methodology

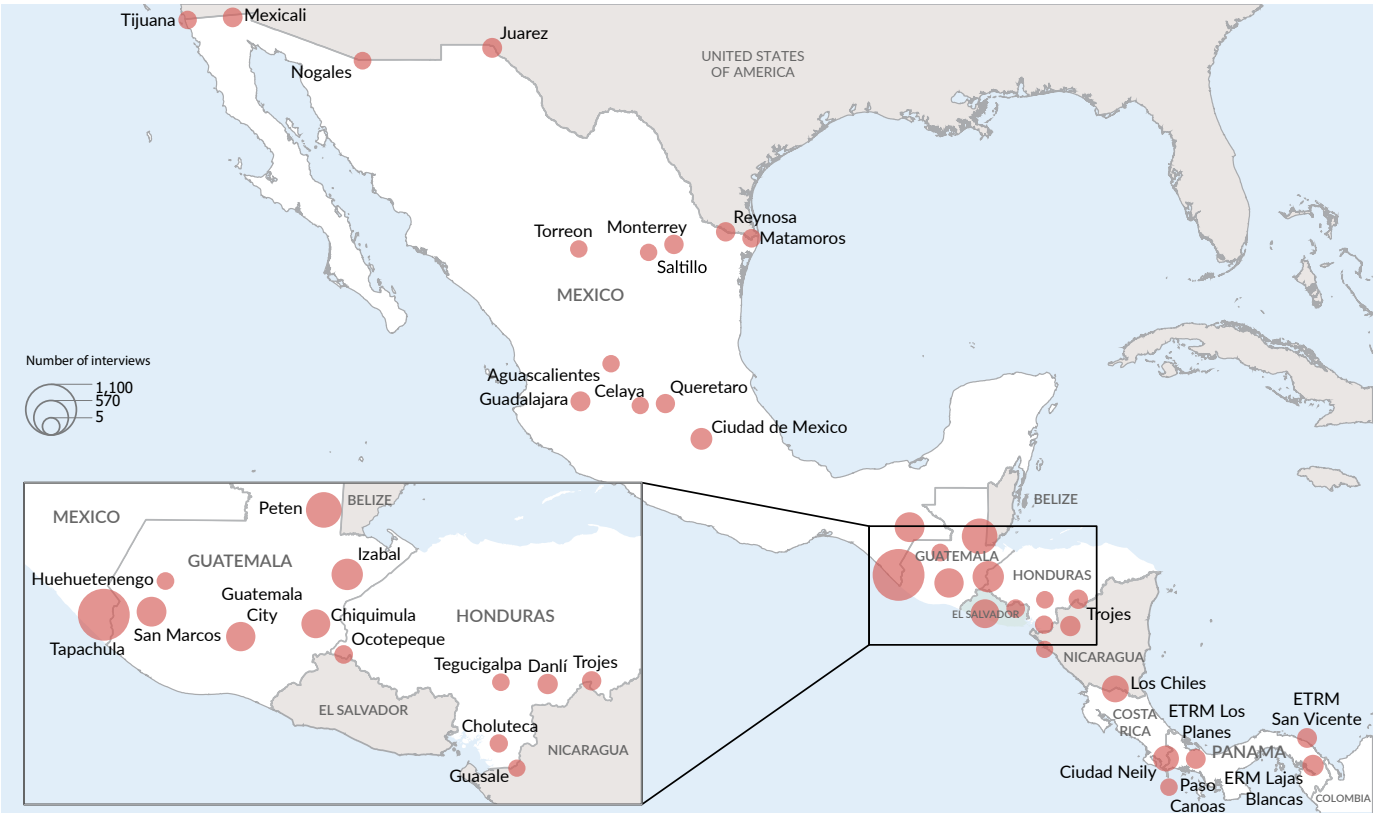
As part of UNHCR-WFP ongoing monitoring efforts, the second round of data collection was conducted between April 1st and June 30th, 2023, in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. Monitoring efforts during the second quarter encompassed not only the administration of questionnaires but also integrated a qualitative research component. This qualitative aspect comprised diverse elements such as field observations[1], interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions. These qualitative methods were applied specifically in Colombia, Panama, and Honduras.

Data collection in the context of mixed movements presents challenges and limitations due to the fluid nature of these movements. Challenges include the need to reach remote and border areas with limited infrastructure and security concerns. Limitations are particularly evident in the case of people originating from continents beyond the Americas. Even though both primary and secondary data[2] on mixed movements in the region point to an increase in the number of people from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean region, the questionnaire has not captured a significant number of these cases. This can be explained due to cultural and linguistic barriers, different routes, specific legal and documentation challenges, as well as logistical and security issues.

Therefore, findings are only representative of the people who were interviewed and cannot be extrapolated to all people on the move. They provide, however, information on the protection environment, protection trends over time, rights violations, and risks (threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities), as well as food security issues faced by the population engaged in mixed movements.

Data collection locations

The majority of interviews conducted in this exercise occurred at border crossings, accounting for 81% of the total. Non-border locations, on the other hand, encompass strategic transit facilities, including bus terminals, shelters, and reception sites, predominantly situated in capital cities or larger urban centers. These non-border locations serve as gathering points for individuals in transit, where they seek support and assistance.



[1] Field observations stem from the Necocli Field Journal in Colombia, a qualitative data exercise conducted by UNHCR Colombia and its implementing partners. It was created as part of an information strategy to identify the protection risks and incidents faced by refugees and migrants along the route or during their stay in Necocli. The entries provide aggregate information regarding their profile, perceptions and experiences prior to the Darien crossing.

[2] Mixed Migration Centre, MMC Latin America and the Caribbean, Quarter 2 2023 https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/QMMU_Q2_2023_LAC.pdf

Mixed Movements Monitoring results

Context: Political and normative landscape

During the second quarter of 2023, an extraordinary influx of individuals involved in mixed movements was documented in the Darien region, with an official registration count of 108,813[3]. This indicates an increase of 20% when compared to the figures reported during the first quarter. The primary nationalities contributing to this influx comprise Venezuelans, Haitians, Ecuadorians, and Chinese.

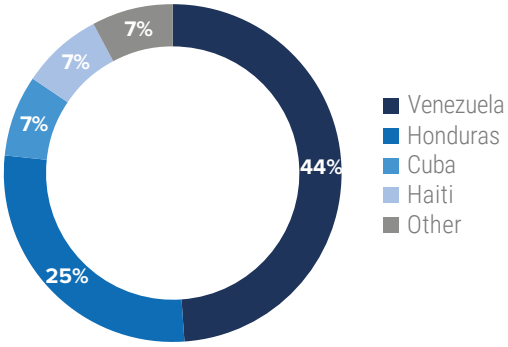
A notable contrast in trends becomes evident when examining the reported number of encounters at the U.S. Southwest land border, where there has been a 13% decrease compared to the corresponding period in 2022. This decrease could be partly attributed to the lifting of Title 42 on May 11, coupled with the announcement and implementation of new measures implemented at the U.S. Southwestern border. These measures include an expedited removal, a 5-year reentry bar, and a presumption of ineligibility barring access to asylum for applicants who have not applied for asylum while passing through a third country or who did not manage to make an appointment to seek asylum at a southern border port of entry.

The decrease in the number of encounters can also be explained by a combination of factors including: the expansion of the number of admitted regular entries (currently 1,450 daily appointments through the CPB One App); the increasing number of people on the move waiting in Northern Mexico to cross (both regularly and irregularly) into the U.S.; and by a geographical and time factor e.g., those who arrived in the Darien in late May and June have not necessarily reached the U.S. Southern border yet.

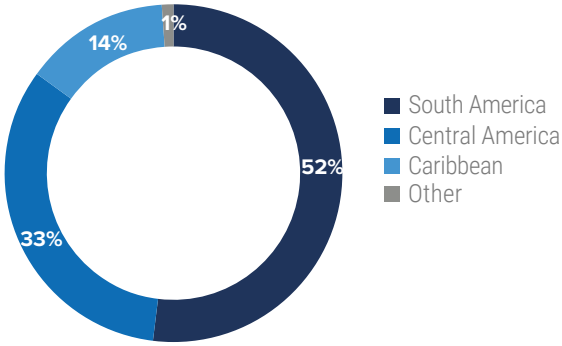
Simultaneously, the U.S. government announced a significant expansion of refugee resettlement and other lawful pathways, introducing a humanitarian parole program for nationals of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In June 2023, the Safe Mobility Offices[4] (SMO) initiative was launched in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, in collaboration with the U.S. Government, UNHCR, and IOM. The goal of this initiative is to enhance access to refugee resettlement and other lawful pathways of admission to the United States.

Demographics

Countries of origin



Regions of origin of respondents
(by geographic location)

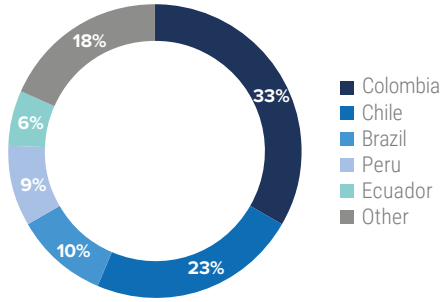


The Mixed Movement Monitoring interviewed people of **46 different nationalities**.

- More than half of the people interviewed are from a South American country (52%), due to the high number of Venezuelans interviewed.
- Approximately one-third of the respondents (33%) identify as originating from a Central American nation. Hondurans stand out as the predominant nationality among Central American respondents.
- The Caribbean ranks third in terms of areas of origin (14%), followed by a smaller fraction of people coming from Asia and Africa (1%).
- In all countries of data collection, except for Mexico, the main nationality interviewed was Venezuelans. Mexico, as the primary location for data collection, exhibited the greatest diversity in the nationalities interviewed, with representatives from 29 different countries of origin, closely followed by Panama, which recorded interviews from individuals hailing from 22 distinct countries.
- Honduras has witnessed a notable surge, with the number of Venezuelans entering the country irregularly during the second quarter doubling compared to previous figures.
- In Guatemala, changes in the interviewed nationalities can be attributed to contextual shifts, primarily difficulties in accessing certain areas due to limited accessibility. Concerning extracontinental nationalities, interviewing them poses a challenge, as they typically move as part of complex smuggling networks.

[3] Servicio Nacional de Migración, Panama: https://www.migracion.gob.pa/inicio/estadisticas
[4] Safe Mobility Initiative: https://movilidadsegura.org/en/

Host countries[5]



24%

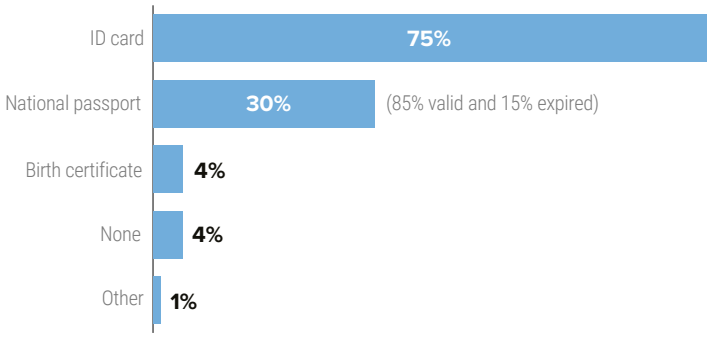
of respondents lived in one or more countries other than their country of origin for at least one year

One in four respondents were residing in a country other than their country of origin for at least one year. The most frequently cited host countries for this group were Colombia (33%), Chile (23%), and Brazil (10%).

The majority of respondents (76%) had been living in their respective countries of origin. Among these, the most frequently mentioned countries were Venezuela (31%), followed by Honduras (24%), and Colombia (12%).

Documentation

Type of document



The majority of respondents (75%) are traveling with an ID card, while 30% carry national passports. Among those with a national passport, 15% have expired documents. The number of people with expired passports has slightly increased from the first to the second quarter of 2023. This trend is particularly visible among Venezuelan respondents, as 35% of them have traveled with expired documents. The stipulation of needing a passport as a prerequisite for accessing parole programs and other visas carries the potential of excluding a significant number of individuals.

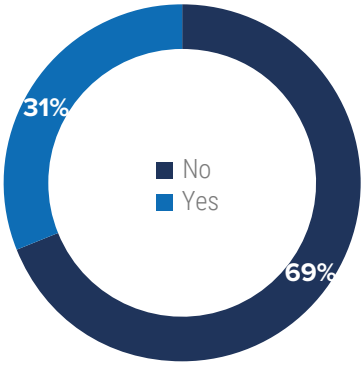
Individuals from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa predominantly use passports for travel (83%), whereas those originating from South and Central American countries tend to use passports less frequently.

Asylum

A small fraction of respondents in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala (4%) have applied for refugee status in the country of data collection or in other countries along the route. However, in Mexico, 81% of the total number of individuals interviewed in the country have made an initial appointment with COMAR (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance) or formalized an asylum claim.

In June, UNHCR released its 2022 Global Trends Report[6] highlighting Costa Rica and Mexico among the major countries for individual registration of new asylum seekers in 2021 and 2022. The increasing trend of asylum applications persist in Mexico in 2023 with close to 75,000 asylum applications recorded up to the end of June, marking a 28% increase compared to the same period the previous year. Haiti (40%), Honduras (24%), Cuba (7%) and Venezuela (5%) are the main countries of origin of asylum seekers in Mexico this year.

Applied for refugee status in country of interview or in another country in the route



[5] Host country: The country in which a non-national stays or resides, whether legally or irregularly.

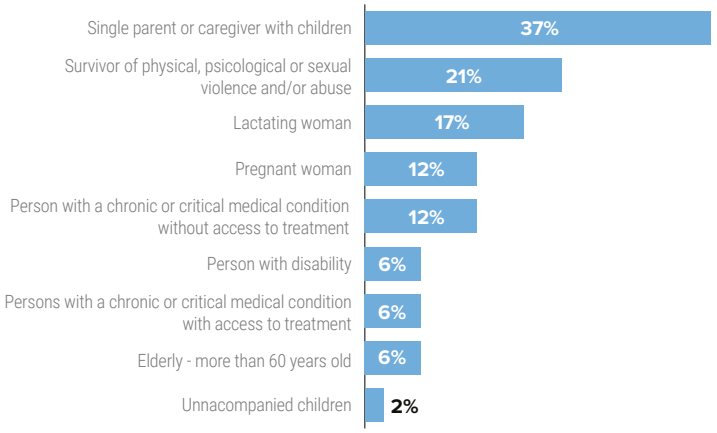
[6] UNHCR Global Trends Report: https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022

Specific needs

26% of respondents had at least one specific protection need.

21% of respondents with specific protection needs reported experiencing physical, psychological, or sexual violence and/or abuse.

Type of specific need



Persons with specific needs[7] are particularly vulnerable to protection risks and abuses as the difficult conditions of the journey heighten their susceptibility to abuse and exploitation and put them at risk of irreversible and lasting harm.

Throughout the second quarter of 2023, approximately one in three respondents indicated having specific protection needs. Among these identified needs, the most prevalent was that of a single parent traveling with their children, accounting for 37% of cases, pointing to a significant presence of children in transit.

A significant portion of individuals with specific needs reported experiencing physical, psychological, or sexual violence and/or abuse, amounting to 21% of the respondents. This issue stands out as the predominant specific need in Panama, where 31% of those reporting specific needs cited instances of violence.

This can be attributed to the challenging context during the crossing of the Darien, characterized by a particularly high incidence of violence and other serious protection risks. Honduras also stands out with a substantial percentage, reaching 27% in comparison to other countries.

Qualitative data collected in Necocli, Colombia, revealed existing health and security concerns prior to embarking on the journey across the Darien jungle. A substantial number of individuals were diagnosed with stomach ailments, skin burns, and colds. Those with chronic illnesses such as diabetes or high blood pressure reported a lack of access to necessary medications along the route. Additionally, upon crossing the Darien, many people report infections and injuries in their legs and feet.

Displacement

Motivations

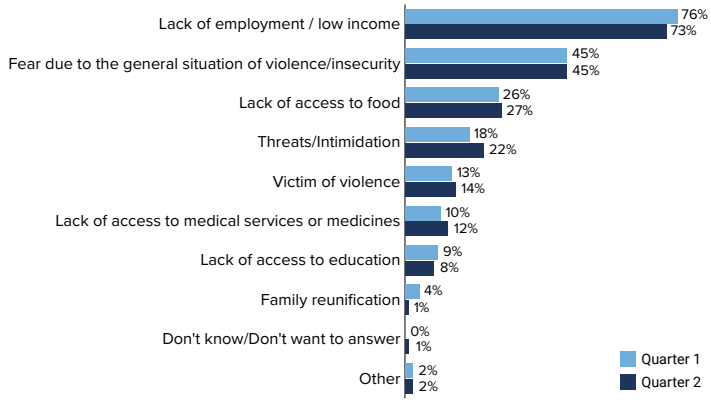
3 out of 5

of respondents cited violence-related factors among the primary reasons motivating their decision to leave their country of origin.

37%

of respondents mentioned both violence and limited access to basic rights and services as reasons to leave their country of origin.

Reasons to leave country of origin[8]



The most frequently cited reason for leaving one's own country of origin was the lack of access to employment (73%). Between the first and second quarters, the proportion of people citing limited access to rights and services as their reason for leaving their country remained prevalent, with a slight decrease from 80% to 77%, while reasons related to violence and seeking international protection increased slightly from 58% to 60%.

Three out of five respondents selected reasons related to violence for their decision to leave their country of origin.

[7] Any person who experiences particular protection risks or barriers due to the intersection of their personal characteristics with the environments, which requires specific targeted actions in order to enjoy the full range of their human rights. Children (especially unaccompanied and separated children), victims of trafficking, women and girls at risk, older persons, and persons with disabilities are among the groups that often have specific protection needs. These persons have the same basic needs as other refugees but often face barriers to having these needs met.

[8] Violence-related reasons to leave include the categories "fear due to general situation of violence / insecurity", "threats / intimidation" and "victim of violence". Reasons related to limited access to rights and services include the categories "lack of employment / low income", "lack of access to food", "lack of access to medical services or medicines" and "lack of access to education".

This implies a significant portion of interviewees with evident international protection needs. **Close to half of the respondents expressed fear arising from the pervasive state of violence and insecurity in their home country.** Following closely, there was an uptick in references to threats, intimidation, and personal experiences of violence as motivations for leaving, rising from 18% to 22%.

The proportion of Colombians (77%), closely followed by Haitians (75%), citing violence-related reasons for leaving their country of origin, is much higher than among other nationalities. This marks a substantial increase from the previous quarter, where the figures were 39% and 42%, respectively. These groups consistently reported a heightened prevalence of both generalized and individualized violence as the primary factors motivating their decision to leave their country of origin.

27% of respondents left the country of origin due to lack of food.

The absolute highest share is found amongst Venezuelans (42%). They are followed by Ecuadorians (36%), Nicaraguans (35 %), Cubans and Haitians (22%). Food security continues to represent one of the main push factors behind mixed movements in the region, weighing on the final decision to leave the country of origin.

Experiences in the route

58% COLOMBIA
52% HONDURAS
52% GUATEMALA
47% NICARAGUA
40% COSTA RICA

Top 5 countries of transit

68% of Venezuelan respondents came directly from their country of origin

This quarter has seen an **increase in the number of Venezuelans coming directly from their country of origin** (68% vs. 63% in the previous quarter). They transited through Colombia before reaching the Darien and moving northwards through Central America and Mexico. The other group of Venezuelans who came from another host country (32%) had departed mostly from Colombia, Peru, and Chile. Smaller percentages came from various other countries across the continent and the Caribbean.

Countries in Central America are manifestly the ones most frequently cited as transit countries. However, transit countries and routes vary considerably if measured against the respondents' country of origin and host country.

Respondents coming from other continents, such as Africa and Asia, reported having started their journey mostly from Brazil (32%). Individuals from Africa and Asia predominantly entered the continent via Brazil, with subsequent transit through Bolivia or Peru. From there, their journey continued northward through Ecuador and Colombia, followed by undertaking the dangerous path through the Darien in Panama. There are fewer instances of direct air arrivals in Colombia or Ecuador, with Chinese nationals being the most common users of this route. Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago also serve as entry points for extra-continental arrivals due to their comparatively less restrictive visa requirements. However, in Suriname, a significant reduction in the numbers of extracontinental (excluding the Chinese) initiating their journey there and subsequently crossing the Darien has been observed following a visa policy change effective May 1, 2023.

In Panama, the number of Afghans crossing through the Darien has surged eightfold during the second quarter of 2023, compared to the corresponding period in 2022.

Insights collected from focus group discussions in 2022 highlighted that a significant portion of Afghans spent several months or years in Brazil before embarking on their northbound journey. In 2023, a different trend is noted, with individuals now arriving directly from Iran and Pakistan to Brazil and initiating their journey within a day or two through Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, towards Central and North America.

Some individuals who are not originally from Central America have reported having started their journeys already from a Central American country, without having crossed the Darien. More than half of the Cubans interviewed (56%) came from their country of origin and started their journey in Nicaragua.

Qualitative data from key informants also mentions the key role of smugglers in the selection of routes. Smugglers charge higher prices, justifying their rates by offering a false sense of security and leading people through longer, riskier routes. Consequently, people in mixed movements are more exposed to protection incidents and threats.

The map below illustrates the primary routes utilized by both continental and extracontinental individuals to reach North America.

Map: Mixed Movements towards North America

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

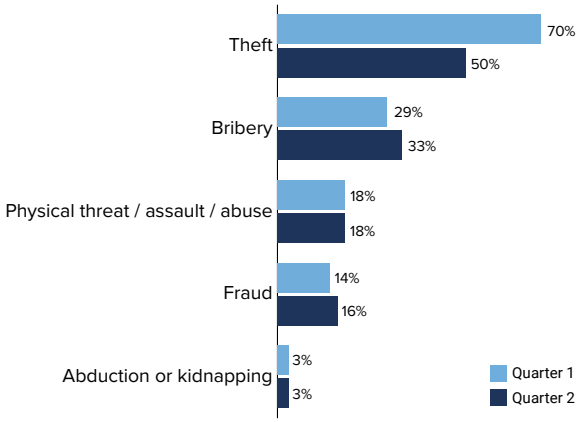
Source: UNHCR and R4V

Protection incidents

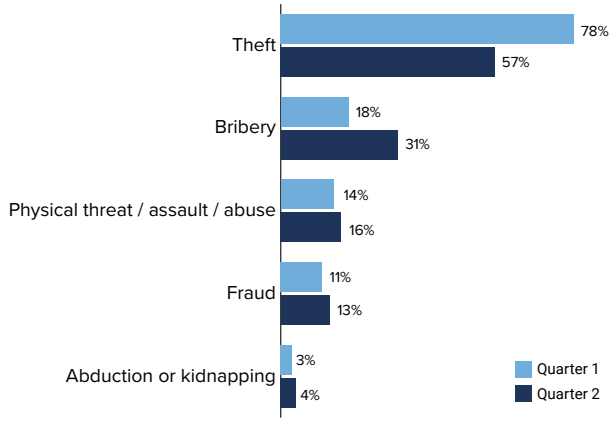
24% of the people interviewed have suffered a protection incident or threat **in the route**.

31% of the people interviewed have suffered a protection incident or threat **in the country of interview.**

Types of protection incidents in the route



Types of protection incidents in the country of interview



The data highlights a rise in the number of reported protection incidents and threats during the second quarter of 2023. Approximately 24% of respondents reported experiencing one or more incidents or threats along their journey, while roughly 31% encountered such situations within the country where they were interviewed.

Another indicator of the deteriorating violence and security situation is the increased variety of incident types reported. In the first quarter, theft was the most prevalent incident (70% along the route and 78% in the interview country). However, during the second quarter, respondents reported an increase in other types of incidents such as bribery, physical threats/assault/abuse, and fraud.

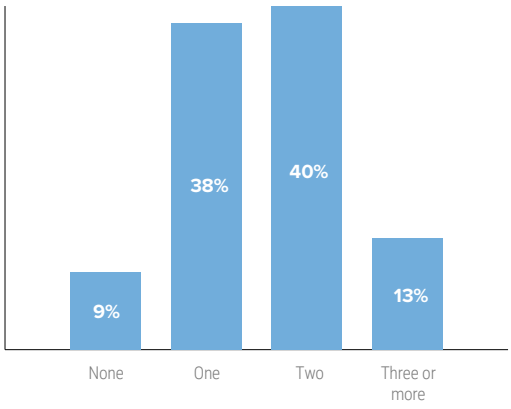
Regarding nationalities, Haitians reported the highest incidence of theft (74% along the route and 70% in the interview country). This trend is also supported by qualitative data. Haitians mentioned experiencing extortion in all countries they passed through and noted instances of discrimination from police officers based on their nationality and race.

Access to food

Almost 1 in 2

respondents consumed only one meal (38%) or none at all (9%), the day before the interview.

How many meals did you eat yesterday?



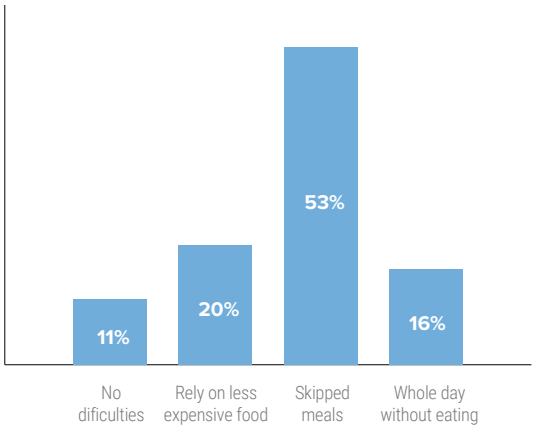
Food insecurity remains a pressing issue throughout the journey. Nearly half of those surveyed (47%) had only managed to consume a single meal (38%) or had gone without food entirely (9%) on the day preceding the interview. The situation worsens significantly among people interviewed in Costa Rica, where one in three respondents (33%) endured a whole day without food, followed by Panama (18%).

In terms of nationalities, Hondurans show a worse situation compared to others, with 56% having inadequate number of meals consumption (none or only one). This is followed by Colombians (53%). Around half of the respondents from Haiti (49%), Ecuador (42%), and Venezuela (50%) are also showing very low food consumption levels.

89%

of respondents faced difficulties covering their food needs and resorted to various coping strategies due to a lack of food or insufficient funds to purchase it.

Percentage reporting different consumption coping strategies



When asked about their food situation over the previous 30 days, only 11% of respondents reported having no difficulties. The vast majority (89%) adopted coping mechanisms to face the shortage of food and/or of financial means to access it. These strategies range from eating cheaper and less preferred foods (20%) to skipping meals or eating less (53%), as well as regularly spending entire days without eating (16%). The latter was reported mostly in Costa Rica (60%), followed by Panama (36%), Honduras (24%), Guatemala (9%) and Mexico (7%).

Food security and protection

The analysis of this quarter's results highlights a clear **link between protection incidents and food security indicators**. Specifically, the questionnaire revealed that 30% of respondents experienced both protection incidents and negative coping mechanisms related to food security, such as skipping meals or going a whole day without eating. Within this group, 95% of individuals who faced protection incidents either along their journey or in the country of data collection, struggled to meet their food security requirements. This underscores a consistent pattern where individuals exposed to protection incidents are more likely to also face challenges related to food security, and vice versa. Addressing food security and protection is at the core of WFP and UNHCR mandates. Therefore, special attention will be devoted in the joint monitoring to further investigate the relationship between these two interrelated dimensions.

23% of respondents reported drinking water from rivers, lakes, or rainwater, with higher rates in Costa Rica (93%) and Panama (87%).

In term of accessing water during their journey, 64% of respondents mentioned markets as their primary source. Humanitarian organizations (34%) and local communities (22%) also play significant roles in providing access to safe water sources. However, a concerning 23% reported obtaining drinking water from rivers, lakes, and rainwater. This proportion increases notably to 93% in Costa Rica and 87% in Panama. Individuals originating from Colombia (42%), Ecuador (42%), and Venezuela (34%) tend to rely more on rivers, lakes, and rainwater as their watersource compared to Central American people, likely due to the Darien route. Similarly, individuals interviewed in Panama noted a high reliance on their own food (41%) as a primary source of sustenance.

Profiles in the current country

86%

of respondents have arrived in the country of interview less than one month ago[9].

78%

of respondents have crossed the border on ground transportation.

When asked if the ground transportation was formal or informal, 61% of the respondents used formal means (e.g., public transportation provided by the government) and 39% used informal means. In Costa Rica, all respondents said they had crossed using formal ground transportation.

[9] The question on time of arrival in country of data collection and means of transportation were not asked in Panama, as the interviews are made in the Migratory Reception Stations (Estaciones de Recepción Migratoria – ERTM) upon arrival of the Darien jungle crossing.

42% Fear deportation

37% Not able to cover essential needs

Main concerns in the last week

79%

of respondents need financial means to continue their journey.

52%

of people interviewed reported access to food for their families as one of the main needs now and for the continuation of their trip.

When analyzing the data considering the country of data collection, notable patterns emerge, particularly in Panama, which stands out due to the unique challenges associated with crossing the Darien. The most frequently mentioned concerns in Panama revolve around physical security (44%). These concerns encompass fears of attacks from both individuals and animals, the risk of drownings, of falls, and similar hazards. Additionally, 24% of respondents reported seeing dead bodies, while others expressed worries about the well-being and care of vulnerable individuals such as pregnant women, the elderly, and the chronically ill (20%).

Haitian respondents had the highest percentage reporting inability to afford food and other essential needs such as health, shelter, and water (37%).

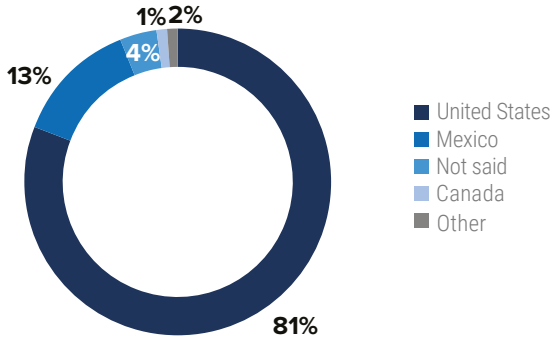
When asked about their main needs in both the country of data collection and to continue their journey, the respondents cited family food provisions (46%) as the primary requirement, followed by shelter (12%) and drinking water (10%). Less frequently mentioned were additional categories like healthcare and legal assistance (each cited by less than 10% of respondents). The majority of respondents indicated a preference for financial assistance (78%) as their preferred form of support.

Intentions

81%

of respondents intend to go to the United States.

Intended country of destination



Similarly, to the previous quarter, a majority of respondents (81%) have expressed their intention to reach the United States. However, there has been a slight increase in the inclination to settle in Mexico during the second quarter. In Mexico, the percentage of respondents aiming to reach the U.S. is notably lower (57%), with 33% indicating their intention to stay in Mexico, compared to 19% in the first quarter.

A number of individuals choose not to disclose their intended destination. This percentage is particularly higher among Haitians, Hondurans, and Cubans.

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | WFP World Food Programme