

**DARIEN  
BORDER  
PROTECTION  
MONITORING**

**2022-2024**

# Context

With an area of more than 11,896 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 52,235 Darien is the largest and poorest province in Panama. Bordering Colombia and the Pacific Ocean, Darien is in the east of the country and is one of the most challenging areas in the world to transit. Yet, thousands of people cross the jungle yearly for protection, dignified opportunities, and family reunification.

Before 2010, people from Asian and African nations primarily used the Darien jungle to cross from South to Central America. In 2020/2021, the number of Cuban and Haitian nationals increased. Currently, Venezuela is the main nationality, making up 67 per cent of the total population crossing the jungle. In 2023, over half a million people entered the country irregularly, setting an unprecedented record in crossings.

Before arriving in the Darien jungle, many refugees and migrants have crossed multiple countries, often through unofficial border crossings, resulting in increased protection risks (especially for more vulnerable populations, such as unaccompanied children), as well as undocumented status, which limits access to basic services, exposing those in need of international protection to the risk of refoulement.

These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated during their journey through the jungle, where they are exposed to a large number of risks and incidents, which include, but are not limited to, thefts, physical and sexual violence, murder, and extortion.

To monitor protection risks and profiles of refugees and migrants on the move, UNHCR conducts protection monitoring in Darien using mixed research methods. This report presents the main findings of all monthly assessments conducted from July 2022 to April 2024.

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After a 4-hour canoe ride, refugees and migrants arrive at the Temporary Migratory Reception Centres managed by the Government of Panama. UNHCR/ Melissa Pinel / February 2024

## Crossing Trends

In the last two years, Venezuelan nationals dominated the mixed movements of refugees and migrants through the Darien jungle.

Peaks of crossings occurred between June and October each year.

Changes in migration policies, mainly in the United States, have also affected the transit of people through Darien, with significant decreases immediately after the *Parole programme*<sup>1</sup> was announced in October 2022 but with a steep increase after the Title 42 policy was removed in

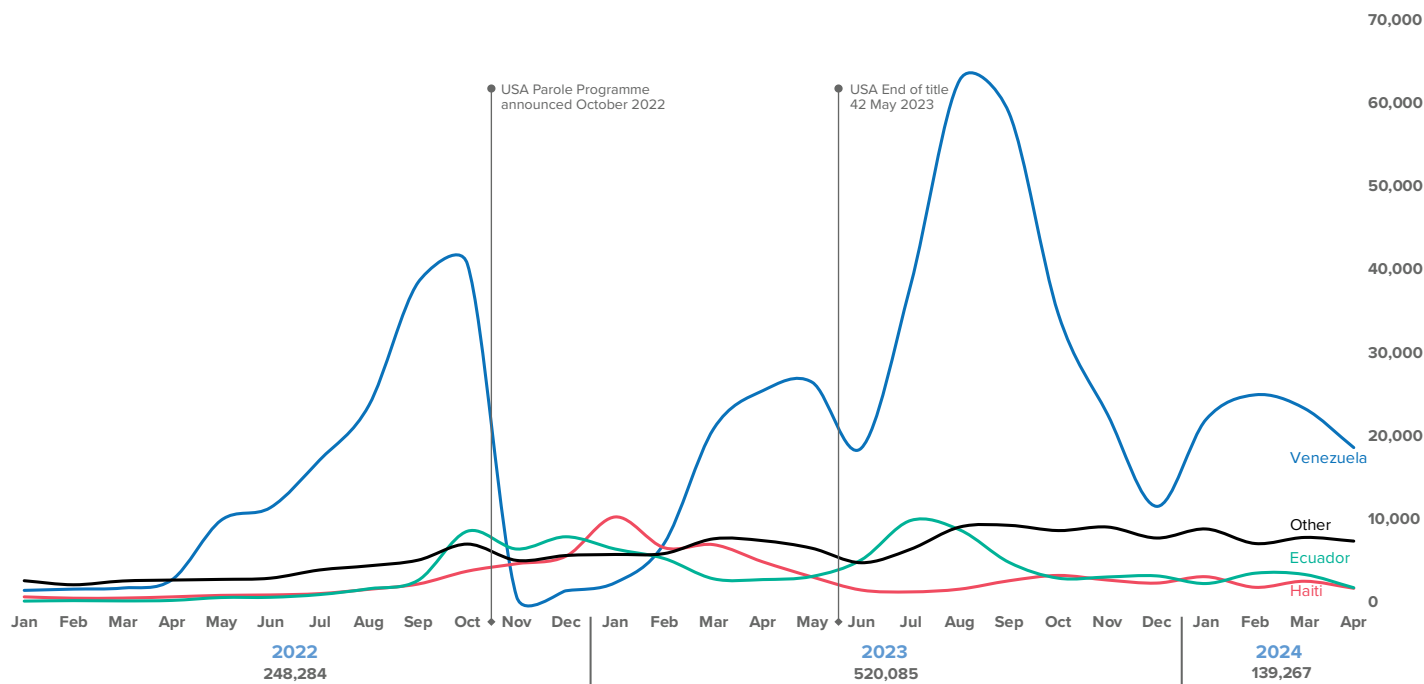
May 2023.<sup>2</sup> While the highest peaks in crossings would be expected around December to March during the dry season (i.e. fewer river surges and storms), crossings are also influenced by cultural and social factors. Some families avoid traveling during Christmas and New Year, while others might wait until the school year ends.

Changes in visa policies are a significant driver in the trend of crossings through Darien. The re-establishment of visa requirements for most nationalities in Suriname in May 2023, a common entry point in South America used by people from

1 See New Migration Enforcement Process for Venezuelans, 12 October 2022, DHS.

2 See US Department of Homeland Security announcement, DHS Continues to Prepare for End of Title 42; Announces New Border Enforcement Measures and Additional Safe and Orderly Processes, 5 January 2023 (link), announcing the establishment of new parole processes for Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans, also referred to as CHNV parole in the body of this document.

FIGURE 1 | Current trends of refugees and migrants crossing the Darien jungle | 2022-2024



outside the Americas, commonly referred to as extra-continentals, likely influenced the drop in the number of extra-continentals entering in June 2023.

However, this number rose in July 2023 with the sharp increase of in Chinese nationals exempted from visas to enter Ecuador.<sup>3</sup>

A drop in the number of Cuban nationals was observed in late 2022 when most could fly directly to Nicaragua after the visa requirement was removed in late 2021 and direct flights began between the two countries.

Policies like the CHNV parole also influenced the number of crossings for specific nationalities. Haitians have been one of the nationalities

benefiting the most from the CHNV parole compared to Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans.<sup>4</sup>

This, along with other factors such as the depletion in the number of Haitians in South American countries, might have impacted the reduction of Haitians crossing through the Darien.

UNHCR has recently identified cases of Haitians who had left their country of origin in the last year, towards French Guiana, Chile and Brazil, so should the security situation in Haiti continue to worsen, together with the impossibility of returning to their country of origin and lack of durable solutions in the Dominican Republic, a renewal in the number of the Haitians crossing the Darien might be occur.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ministeriodegobierno.gob.ec/ciudadanos-chinos-no-requieren-de-visa-para-ingresar-a-ecuador-desde-el-1-de-marzo-de-2016/>

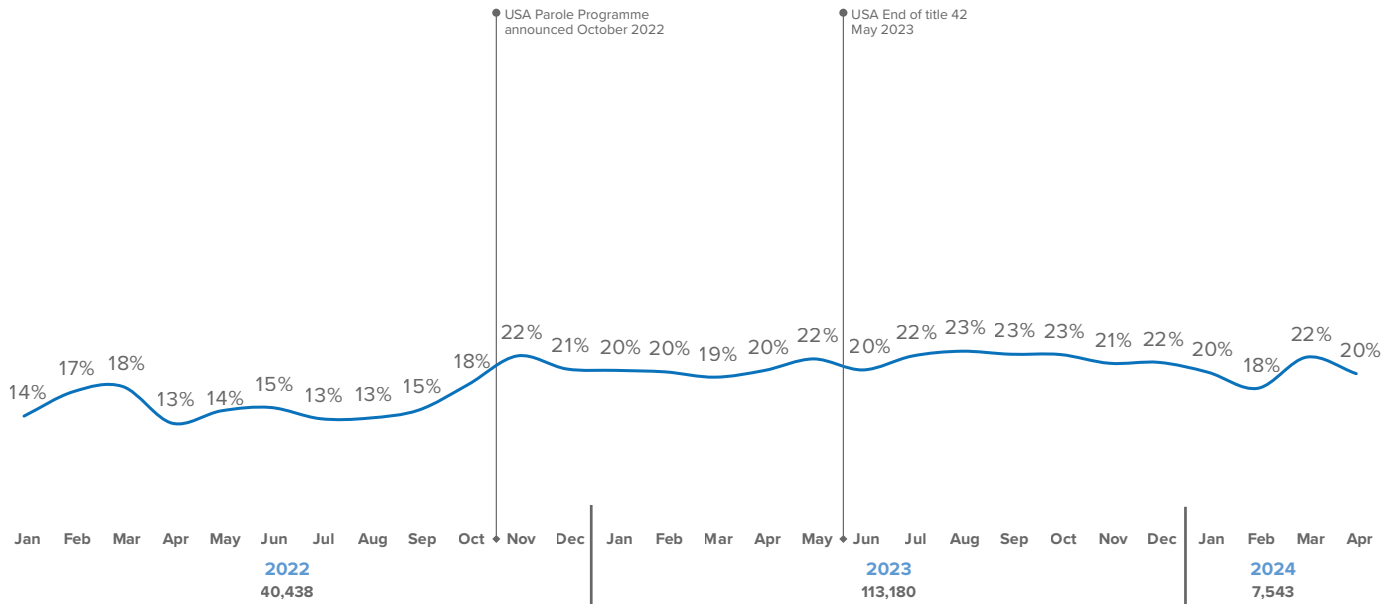
<sup>4</sup> CBP November 2023 monthly update: <https://statics.teams.cdn.office.net/evergreen-assets/safelinks/1/atp-safelinks.html>

The number of children crossing the jungle has mirrored the movement of adults, with peaks in October 2022 and September 2023.

The percentage of children within the total of people crossing the Darien jungle was higher in November 2022 (22%) and July to October 2023,

reaching a quarter of the people crossing Darien in August and September 2023. In 2023 there were 15 births whose birth occurred taking place while crossing the Darien jungle.

FIGURE 2 | Proportion of children who entered Panama through the Darien jungle relative to total monthly entries | 2022-2024



## Country of origin vs Country of residence

Many refugees and migrants have not permanently resided in their country of origin for twelve months. Nearly half (47%) came directly from their countries of origin, while 26% lived in Colombia and 11% were in Chile.

Looking at the breakdown of countries of residence by nationality, Ecuadorians and Colombians are the main population groups coming from their country of nationality. Most Haitians came from Brazil and Chile, and less than 1% of people reported coming directly from Haiti.

Half of the Venezuelans came directly from their country, while the other half came from other countries of residence, mainly Colombia (26%) and Peru (11%).

While initially, most Afghans resided in Brazil for longer than a year, the trend changed in 2023. Despite all interviewed Afghans starting their journey in Brazil. By June 2023, on average, half were coming directly from Afghanistan, and only 40% resided in Brazil for longer than a year.

FIGURE 3 | Interviewed individuals by country of origin and last country of residence

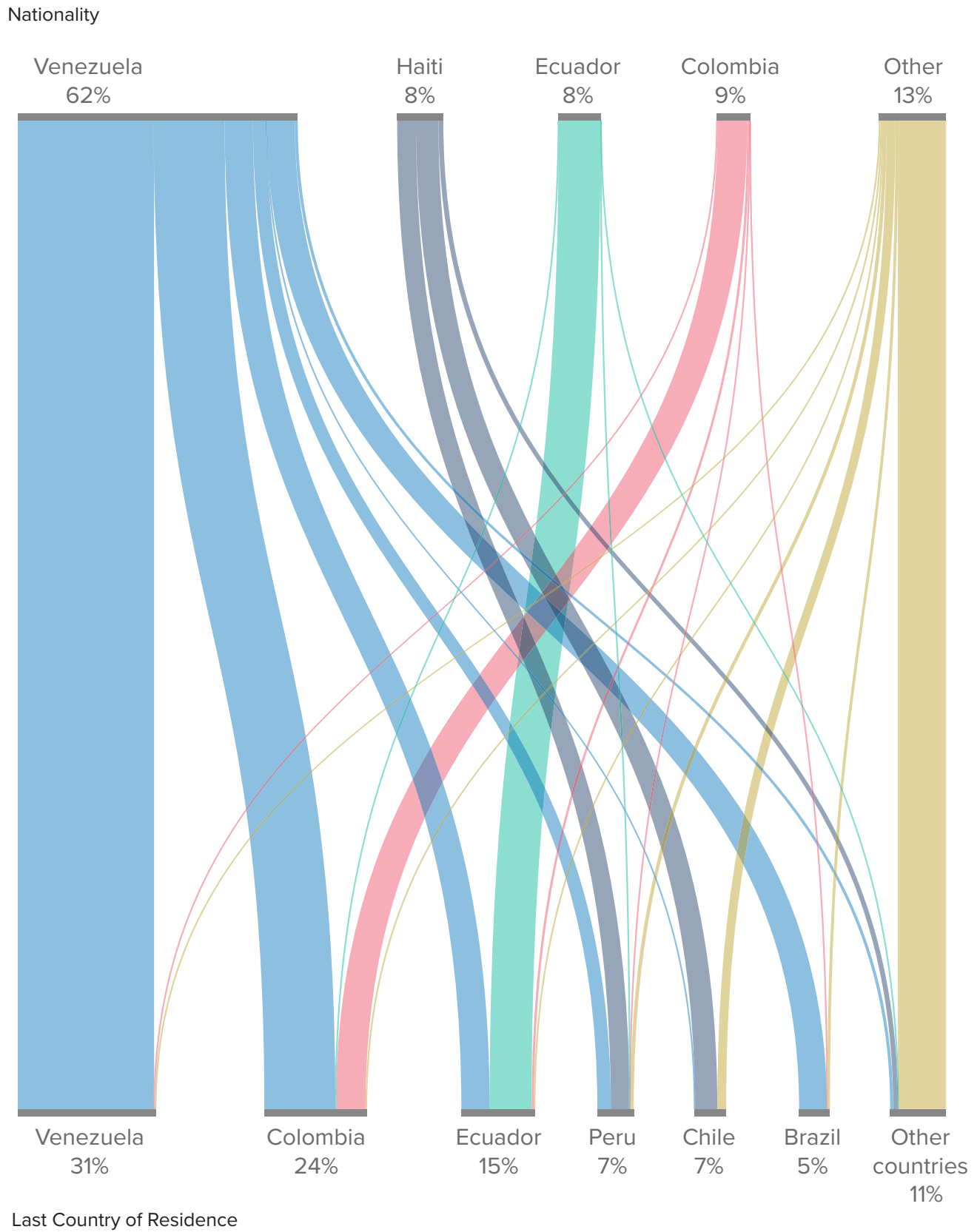
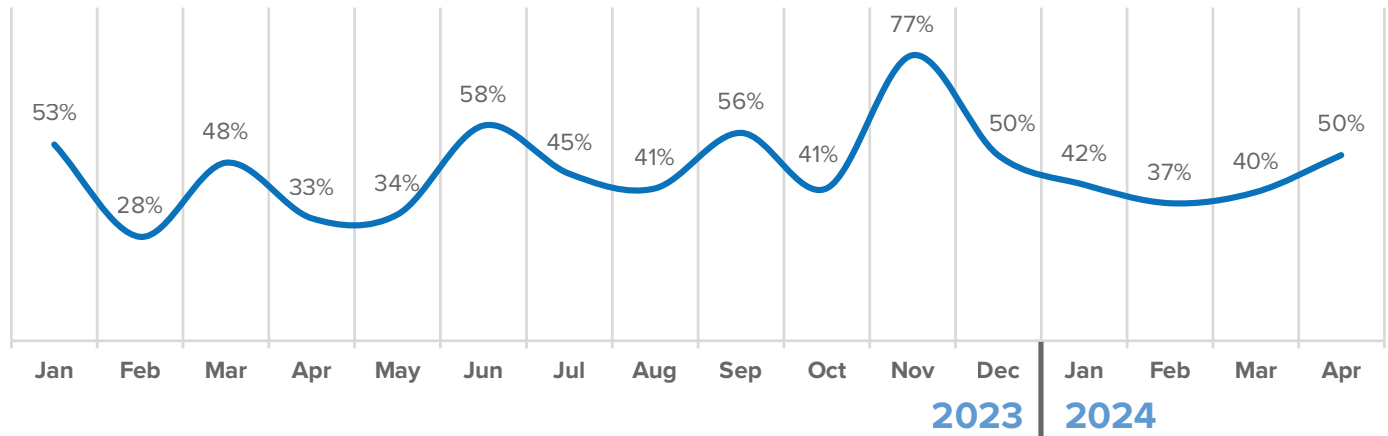


FIGURE 4 | Proportion of Venezuelans traveling directly from Venezuela



## International Protection Needs

**Nearly a quarter of participants have reported threats, intimidation, and direct violence against them as the main reason for leaving their country of origin.**

Most respondents (72%) left their country of origin due to the lack of employment or low income. However, lack of access to basic services and violence were also commonly reported as

push factors, either directly or as underlying reasons for the economic drivers.

Several Ecuadorians reported losing their livelihoods and businesses after gangs threatened them to pay for security for their businesses. Access to essential services and direct violence were also among the top reasons for leaving the country of origin.

FIGURE 5 | Reasons for leaving the country of origin

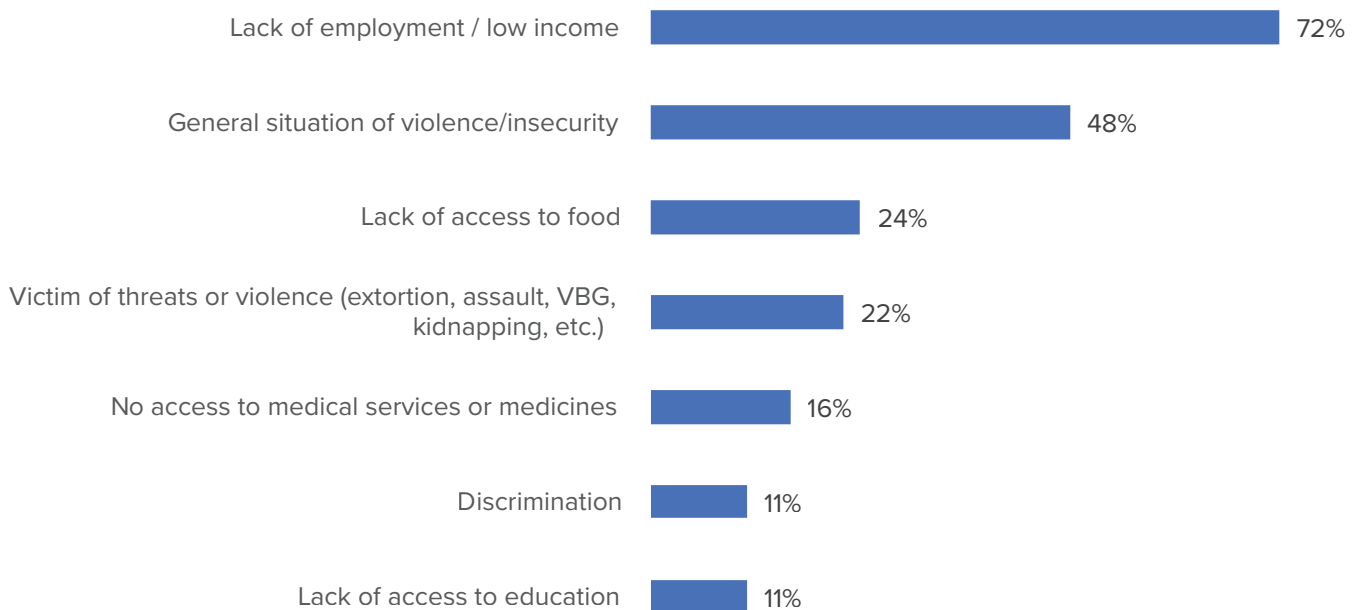


FIGURE 6 | **Reasons for leaving the country of residence**

Reasons for leaving by country of origin	Venezuela	Haiti	Ecuador	Colombia	Afghanistan
Lack of employment / low income	80%	76%	61%	57%	41%
General situation of violence/insecurity	42%	70%	68%	52%	69%
Lack of access to food	29%	28%	11%	10%	3%
Lack of access to medical services or medicines	19%	21%	12%	5%	9%
Victim of threats or violence (extortion, assault, VBG, kidnapping, etc.)	14%	25%	30%	33%	75%

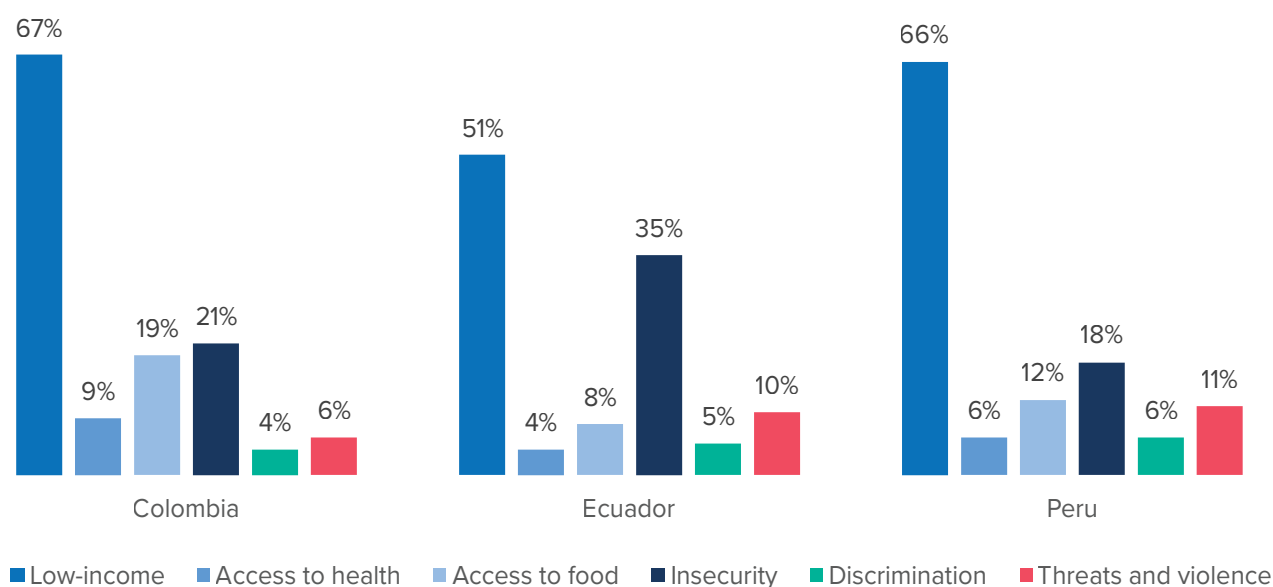
The reasons for leaving the country of origin among top assessed nationalities vary: safety and security are more frequently reported among Ecuadorians and Colombians as the reason for flight; 33% of Colombians left due to threats and violence, and in the case of the Ecuadorians, two-thirds of the assessed population (68%) left due to the general insecurity in their country.

Three-quarters of interviewed Afghans (75%) left their country of origin due to threats and intimidation.

During Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), all Afghans declared they had left their country due to threats against their lives and/or their families by the Taliban regime.

Their protection needs were clear. Participants included professional women who had worked for the rights of Afghan girls and women, former government officials who worked in infrastructure and sanitation, one of whom received threats and his house and vehicle were confiscated.

FIGURE 7 | **Venezuelans: Reasons for leaving the country of residence**



Respondents reported similar reasons for leaving their country of residence. Venezuelans' main reasons for leaving their country of residence are access to employment and low income.

Geographic insecurity is also one of the reasons for leaving Ecuador. Access to health is Colombia's second reported reason, followed by discrimination in Peru.

Most Haitians reportedly left their country of origin more than five years ago and had been residing in other South American countries such as Chile and Brazil. Most children from Haitian families were nationals of these countries, having been born and raised there.

The reasons mentioned for leaving their countries of residence were discrimination, poor pay, and non-payment for work done, coupled with integration difficulties due to language barriers and cultural differences

Focus group participants were concerned that they could again be blackmailed by authorities along the route and distrust public security forces.

The motivation for going to the United States and Canada is a better quality of life, higher income, and better opportunities for their children. The insecurity and internal conflict in Haiti remain one of the main reasons why Haitians won't return home.

Nearly one in ten people reported filling out an asylum application in a different country before crossing Darien. This proportion is more significant among some nationalities.

For instance, 12% of Colombians and Haitians applied for asylum before arriving in Panama, while only 1% of Ecuadorians reported it. UNHCR has identified a growing number of recognized refugees traveling in mixed movements and people undergoing resettlement.



*Between 2022 and 2024, the proportion of children entering Panama through the Darién jungle fluctuated, representing between 13% and 23% of the total monthly entries. UNHCR/ Melissa Pinel / February 2023*

## Documentation

Over half of the interviewed refugees and migrants (58%) traveled with their national ID cards as their primary travel documentation. Around 34% traveled with their passports.

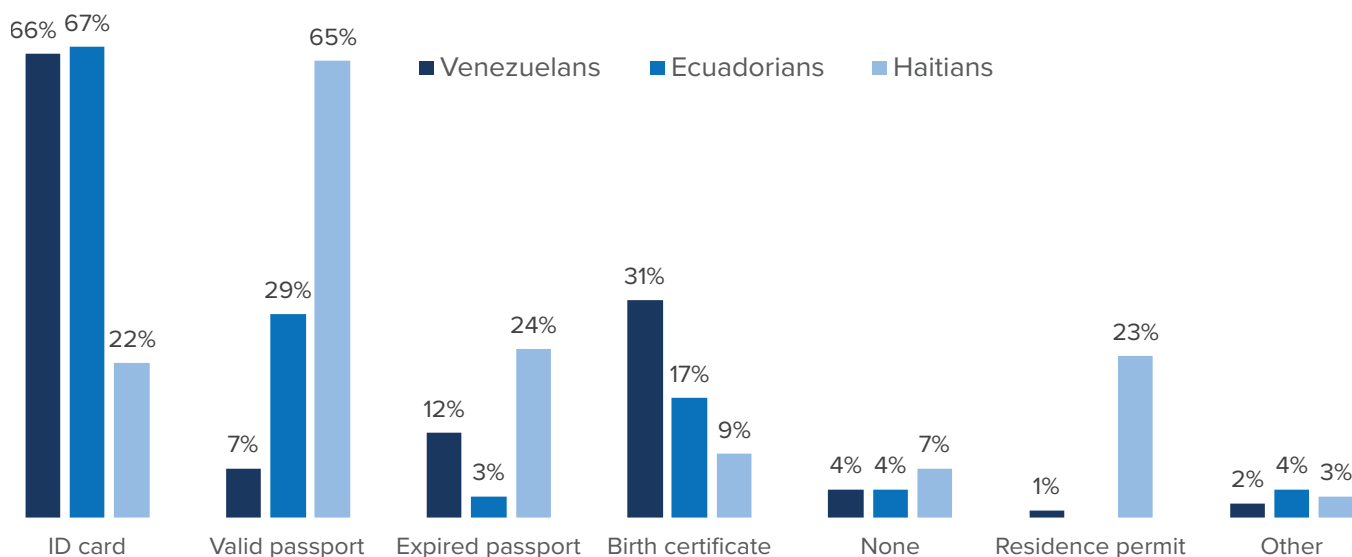
However, 10% had their passports expired. Around 24% traveled with a birth certificate, 5% with a residence permit, and 6% traveled without documents. When looking at the main three assessed nationalities, most Venezuelans traveled with their national ID card, similar to Ecuadorians.

In contrast, Haitians mostly traveled with valid passports, and one-quarter with a valid residence permit from their country of residence.

During the FGDs, Ecuadorians reported the long waiting times for accessing a passport in Ecuador as one of the reasons to travel through irregular means.

Venezuelans reported the high costs of the passport and barriers to accessing the procedure as one of the main reasons they had limited access to valid passports. The obstacles to a valid passport have also undermined access, particularly for refugees and migrants from Venezuela, to legal pathways such as the CHNV parole and others.

FIGURE 8 | Documentation type held by the family by country of origin



## Risks along the route

Refugees and migrants took different routes before passing the Darien jungle. Venezuelans start their journey either from Venezuela or their countries of residence (mainly Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru), while Colombians and Ecuadorians typically begin their journey from their country of origin.

Chinese nationals usually start their journey from Ecuador, a country that exempts them from visas. Many other extrac Continentals, like Afghans, begin their journey from Brazil, generally entering with humanitarian visas received from Iran and Pakistan. Most Haitians start their journey from their countries of residence, mainly Chile, Brazil, and French Guiana.

Most people (70%) started their journey towards Darien less than four weeks ago. On average, people reported crossing the jungle in four days. Some people spent up to 21 days in the jungle in 2022. Those traveling with children and other vulnerable family members took longer. During the crossing, refugees and migrants are exposed to several risks and concerns.

The main three worries were the physical security of the individuals and their families (53%), cadavers' observation (33%), and getting lost in the jungle (20%). Another concern was the ability to care for children and other dependents like pregnant women, elders, and chronically ill (23%).

During the FGDs, refugees and migrants reported that one of the most traumatic experiences was the observation of human corpses of different ages, including children, with varying degrees of decomposition. The number of people who reported corpse observation was higher during the rainy season. (June – October)

Many people are guided through the jungle by plastic bags or pieces of blue cloth that are tied to plants. These indicate that they are on the right path. The presence of red bags means that a corpse is nearby, and the presence of black bags signals a high-danger zone.

During the FGDs and the individual interviews, an undetermined number of people were reported missing during river crossings (particularly babies and small children) or while camping near riverbanks. People reported serious risks of wild animal attacks on rivers and trails and being bitten by insects.

The physical demands of crossing thick swamps that, in some cases, covered them up to their waists, and the danger faced in crossing deep chasms, were reported as some of the most significant physical and mental challenges encountered. A considerable number of groups traveled with survivors of sexual violence along the jungle. Often, people could not identify the



*A Venezuelan family of four, described spending eight days walking in the Darien jungle without access to food, water or medical assistance. UNHCR/ Melissa Pinel / December 2023*

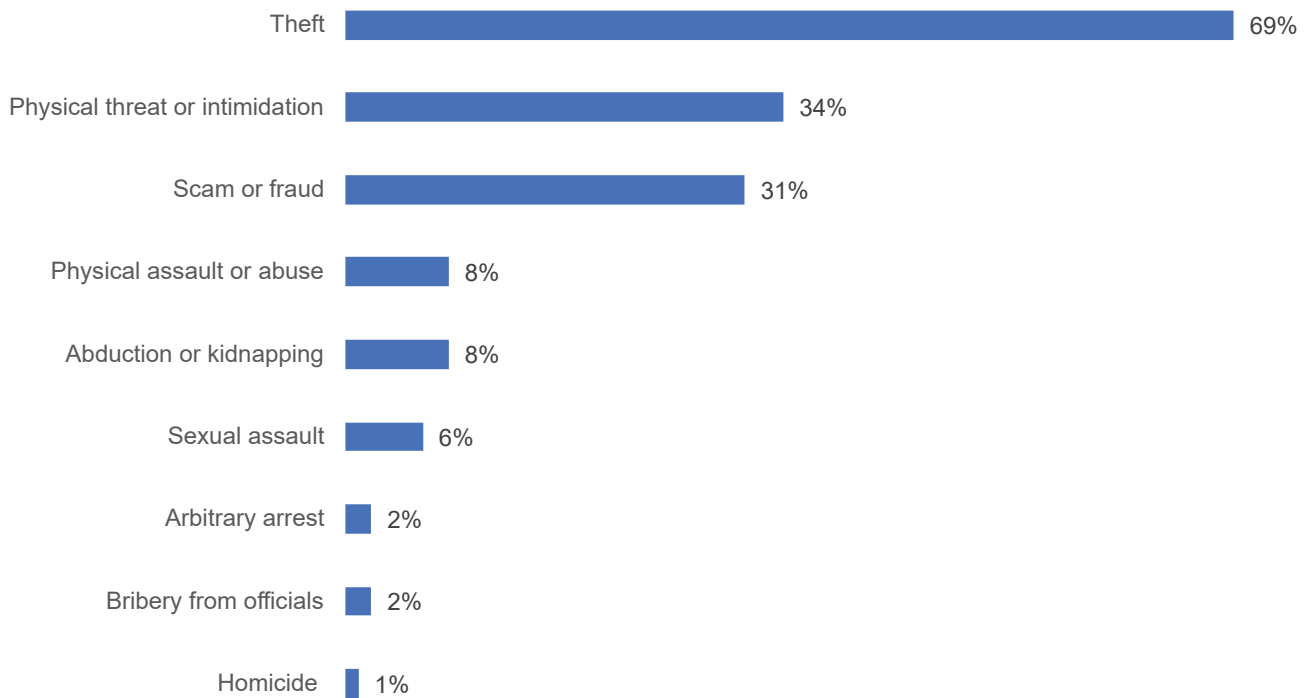
perpetrators, as they had their faces and heads covered. According to individual interviews, 6% of individuals traveled with a survivor of sexual violence in their group. It is likely that this figure is underestimated, given the current conditions under which they occur and are reported.

Other partners have reported an increase in the cases of sexual violence, including cases of violent genital digital rape during group armed robbery incidents.

At least 38% experience an incident or abuse when crossing the jungle. When looking at the top nationalities assessed, Colombia and Haiti (including their children nationals from Chile and Brazil) reported the highest proportion of individuals (41% and 38% respectively) experiencing security incidents.

No significant differences were observed among female and male respondents.

FIGURE 9 | Proportion of security incidents experienced



Seven in ten people were theft victims, followed by physical intimidation or threats (34%), and scam or fraud (31%).

Several people experienced multiple robberies during their crossing and in different modalities. They were robbed by more organized groups, who demanded payments of 100 USD, or the equivalent, in personal items and suffered much violence when they refused to pay.

In other cases, they faced robberies and assaults by more disorganized groups armed with machetes, sometimes resulting in more violent acts.

Individuals traveling alone or in small groups and extra-continental people (perceived as traveling with more money) were the most susceptible to these robberies.

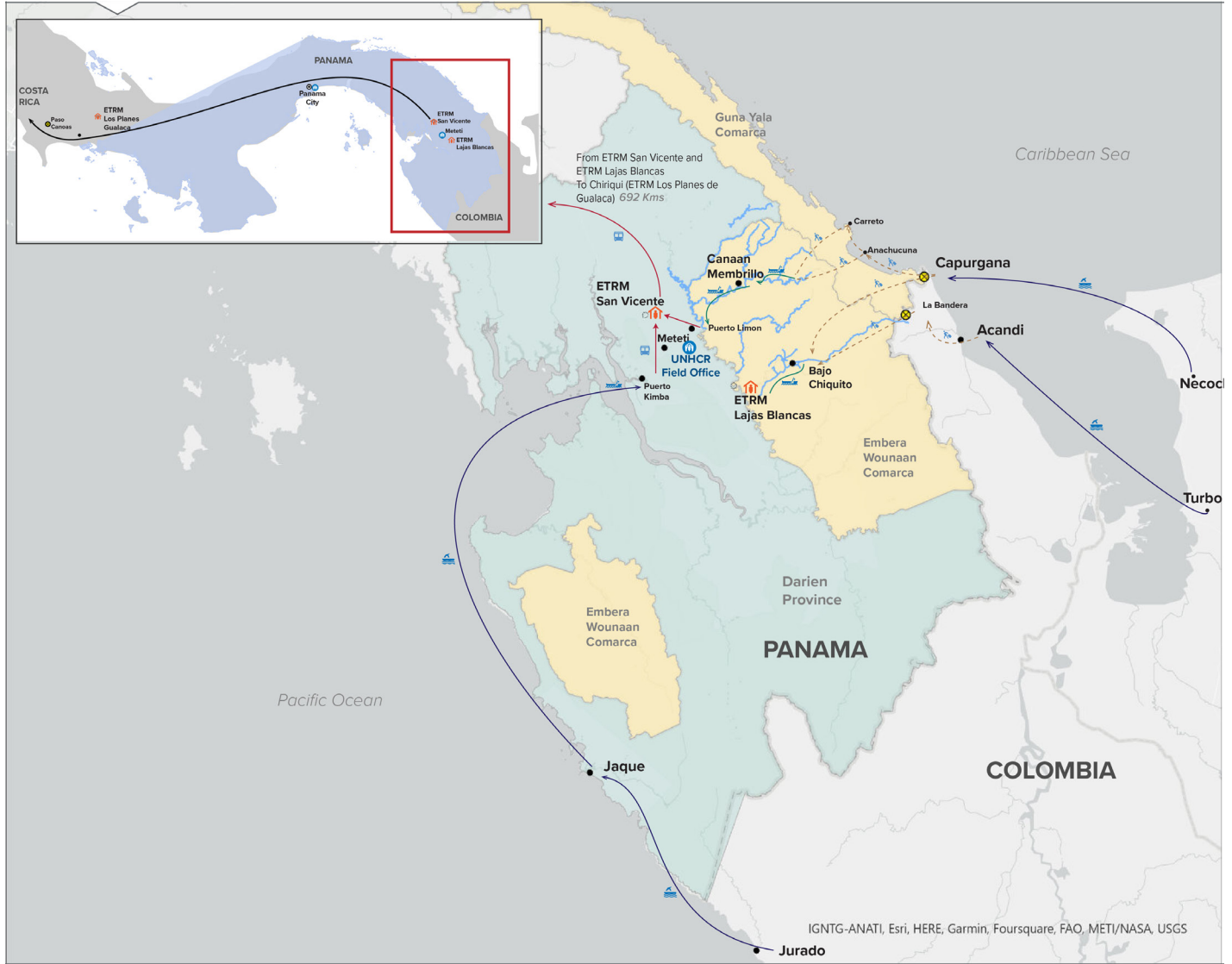
# Conclusion

Several factors in countries of origin, transit, and destination drive mixed movements across the Darien jungle. While a significant proportion of people have left their country of origin and residence in search of better economic opportunities and access to better services, around a quarter of the people who cross the Darien jungle, have left due to direct violence, threats, and intimidation.

In addition to international protection needs, people crossing the Darien are also exposed to several protection risks that, combined with their specific needs, make them highly vulnerable.

Among these, pregnant and lactating women, unaccompanied children, single parents with children, and older people, among others, experience a higher proportion of theft, robbery, sexual abuse, violence and intimidation, while crossing the jungle.

## Mixed Movements routes across the Darien Jungle Panama and Colombia border April 2024



- ETRM (Migratory Temporal Reception Center)
- Sea route by boat
- Main Walking routes (2024)
- River route by canoe
- Bus route

*Disclaimer: Featured routes are based on April 2024 reported main routes. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations*

## Methodology

**For border protection monitoring, UNHCR uses the following qualitative and quantitative tools**

**Monthly individual interviews** consisting of data collection in key transit points in Darien and Chiriqui provinces, such as ETRMs San Vicente, Lajas Blancas, and Los Planes de Gualaca, in addition to the city of David and the town of Paso Canoas, performed by UNHCR Multi-Functional team with staff based in Panama, Darien and Chiriquí offices.

Using a standardized questionnaire assessing core protection, vulnerability and needs indicators, data is collected through a structured tool deployed at UNHCR's KOBO Toolbox secure server. Given the dynamic and challenging context for data collection in these locations, the surveys are collected using non-probability quota sampling. While the results do not represent all of the nationalities crossing the Darien jungle, they indicate the situation and needs of people traveling in the mixed movements.

**Quarterly focus group discussions (FGDs)** are conducted to obtain more qualitative and in-depth information on topics that emerge from the individual interviews. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, FGDs are typically gender—and nationality-specific. So far, 20 FGDs have been conducted with refugees and migrants from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, Colombia, Afghanistan, and China.

**Key informant interviews with humanitarian partner organizations** were conducted to explore specific issues that are not always easily captured through individual interviews and focus groups. Topics such as sexual violence, disability, and LGBT are explored through these interviews with first responders.

All MCO Panama Border Protection Monitoring products  
can be found at [UNHCR Panama Data Portal](#)

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2022-2024