

A South American Migration Crisis: Venezuelan Outflows Test Neighbors' Hospitality

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It is increasingly evident that the Venezuelan exodus that began in 2014 is now the fastest-escalating displacement of people across borders in Latin American history. The deepening political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has led to the mass movement of people across the region—mostly to Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru—and beyond. Estimates of Venezuelans on the move are imprecise, but range from 1.6 million to 4 million people abroad as of early 2018. Hundreds of thousands more have left in the first half of the year, and the numbers keep climbing—outpacing earlier humanitarian flows from Central America, Colombia, and Cuba. Some experts predict the displacement could surpass the 5.6 million Syrians who have fled that country's civil war.

These figures attest to the severity of the Venezuelan tragedy and suggest that this displacement crisis is only beginning. Government mismanagement of the economy has led to runaway inflation and shortages of basic goods in what was once a well-off country, pushing many people into poverty. Some 80 percent of the population was living in severe poverty as of April 2018, and hundreds of thousands were at risk of starvation.

There is no reason to believe that the outflow of Venezuelans will diminish in the foreseeable future. Roughly half of surveyed young people between ages 18 and 24, and 55 percent of upper-middle class respondents, said they hoped to leave, according to a December 2017 poll by Consultores 21—and most identified Latin America as their preferred destination. The number of Venezuelans entering Peru almost quadrupled over a four-month period: from 100,000 in March 2018 to nearly 350,000 in early June. As the exodus expands, the humanitarian needs of migrants grow more urgent.

These outflows pose a significant challenge to regional governments and have led to a mosaic of different policy reactions. Due to the scale of the phenomenon, governments across the region that have affirmed their solidarity with Venezuelans and have been receptive to arrivals still face difficulties in meeting the needs of migrants. In some cases, domestic pressure to limit Venezuelan entries is mounting.

This article examines the characteristics of Venezuelan migrants based on the latest data available, before discussing how governments in the region have responded to the inflow and what the crisis means in the context of shifting Latin American immigration laws.

Venezuelan Migrants: Who Are They?

According to the available demographic data, most surveyed Venezuelan migrants are of working age, with a stronger representation of young adults in some countries (Peru and Costa Rica; see Table 1).

Table 1. Age Distribution of Venezuelan Migrants, Selected Countries, 2017-18

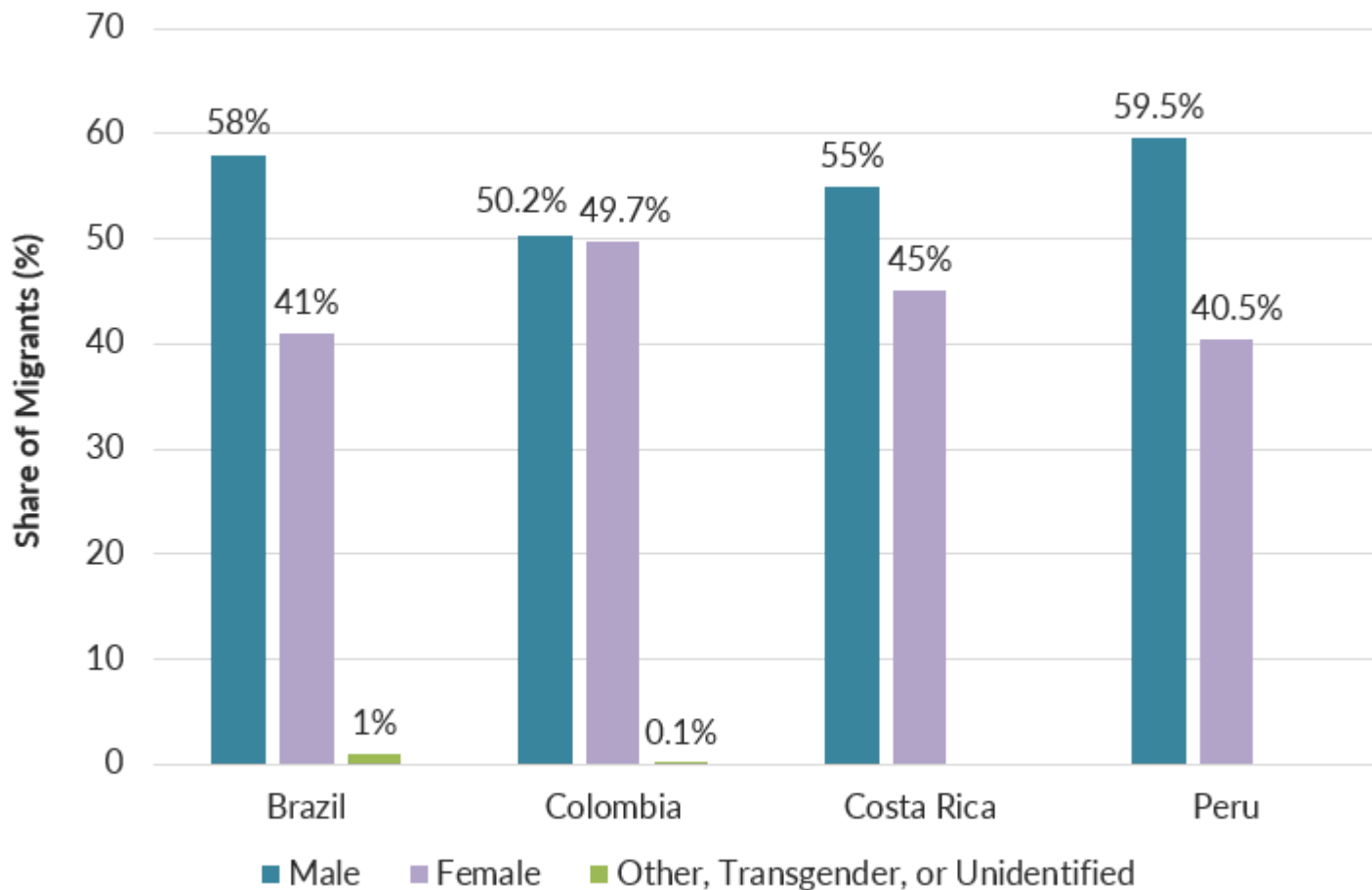
Brazil		Colombia		Costa Rica		Peru	
Age	Share (%)	Age	Share (%)	Age	Share (%)	Age	Share (%)
15-24	22	Children/ Adolescents	26.8	18-25	17.5	18-24	27.3
25-49	71	Adults	70.6	26-35	48.7	25-29	25.8
				36-45	27.5	30-34	17.8
				46-55	3.8	35-39	12.3
50 or Over	7	60 or Over	2.6	56 or Over	2.5	40-59	15.8
						60 or Over	1.0

Notes: Brazil data are based on 3,516 interviews with participants ages 15 and older, conducted from January 2018 through March 2018; Colombia data were collected at border checkpoints, spanning all age groups (reporting period unspecified, but released in 2018); Costa Rica data are based on 80 interviews with participants ages 18 and older (reporting period unspecified, but released in 2018); Peru data are based on 1,636 interviews with participants ages 18 and older, conducted between April and May 2018, and represent the mean of data points collected in Lima, Tacna, and Tumbes.

Sources: Asociación de Consultores y Asesores Internacionales (ACAI), "Situación de Personas Venezolanas en Costa Rica" (country report for the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 168th session, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, May 2018); Government of Colombia, "Informe Final: Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos en Colombia" (presentation of survey results, June 2018), [available online](#); International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Monitoreo de Flujo de Migración Venezolana en el Perú, DTM Ronda 3" (fact sheet, July 2018), [available online](#); IOM, "UN Migration Agency Releases First Displacement Tracking Matrix Results on Venezuelan Flows in Brazil" (press release, April 27, 2018), [available online](#).

In all cases, most migrants are male, though the gender split is almost even in Colombia (see Figure 1). While the reasons for this have not been studied extensively, it can be speculated that young male Venezuelans generally migrate first, putting down roots in preparation for the arrival of their families. Venezuelan migrants are increasingly bringing their children, and entire families often leave together.

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Venezuelan Migrants, Selected Countries, (%), 2017-18



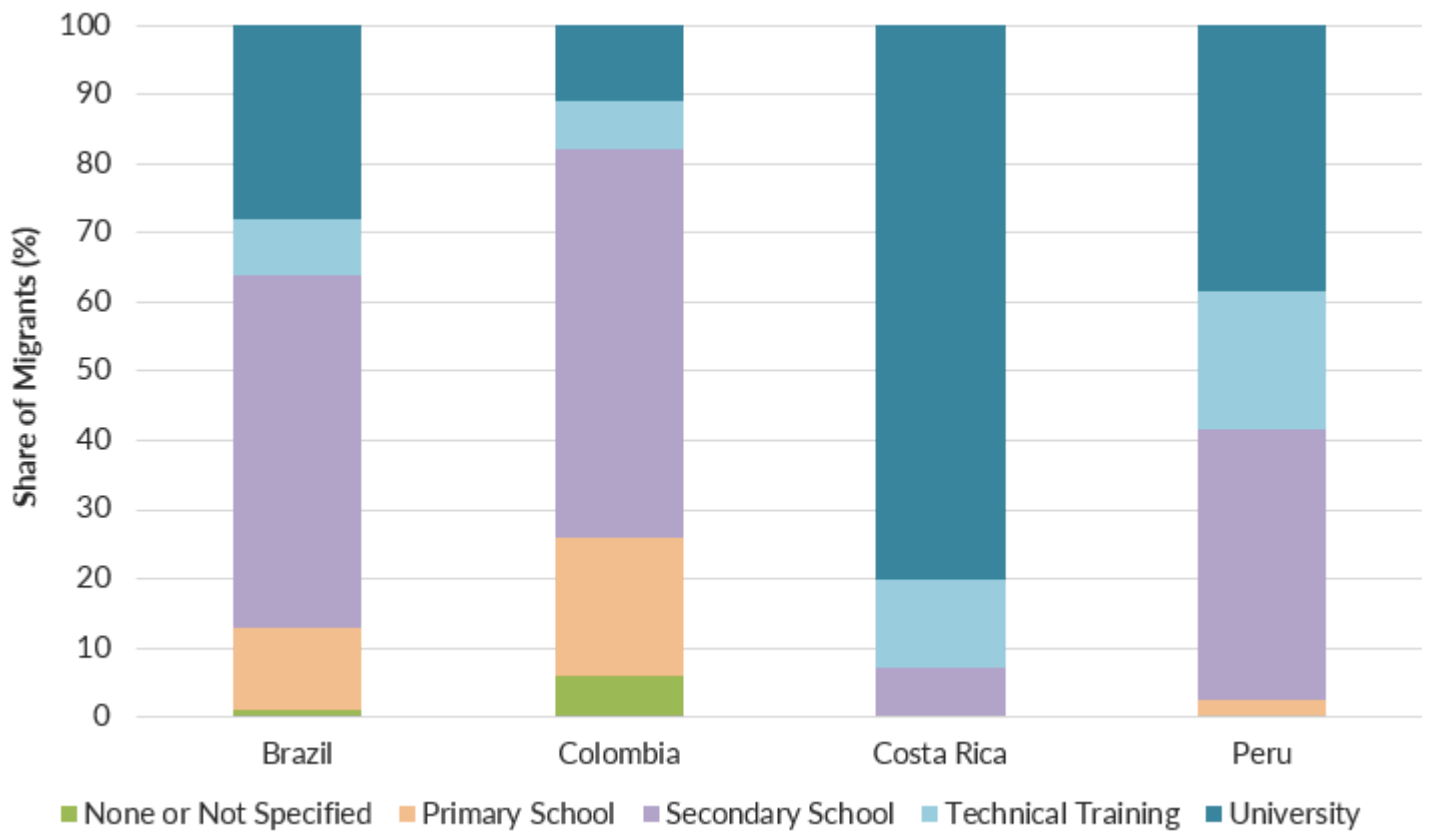
Note: See Table 1 notes for information on sample size by country.

Sources: ACAI, Situación de Personas Venezolanas en Costa Rica; Government of Colombia, “Informe Final: Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos en Colombia;” IOM, “Monitoreo de Flujo de Migración Venezolana en el Perú, DTM Ronda 3;” IOM, “UN Migration Agency Releases First Displacement Tracking Matrix Results on Venezuelan Flows in Brazil.”

As the crisis in Venezuela deepens, emigrants face increasingly dire conditions. In a January 2018 report, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described growing numbers of Venezuelans arriving in Colombian border regions as having “increasing humanitarian needs and less means than those who arrived in earlier months.” A similar situation was reported in Brazil, where the government of Roraima state declared a state of social emergency in late 2017 as a result of an “intense, unlimited, and disorderly flow of Venezuelans without means or conditions to sustain themselves.”

These observations reflect the changing socioeconomic and educational profile of Venezuelans leaving home. Historically, Venezuelan emigrants tended to be highly educated and skilled. Between 1990 and 2000, Venezuelans in the United States were among the immigrant groups with the highest share of individuals occupying management positions, for example. While half of Venezuelans leaving home in 2017 still reported having a college degree, the migrant profile is rapidly diversifying. Educational attainment is lower on average in neighboring countries and increases with distance traveled to the country of destination (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Educational Attainment of Venezuelan Migrants, Selected Countries, (%), 2017-18



Note: See Table 1 notes for information on sample size by country.

Sources: ACAI, "Situación de Personas Venezolanas en Costa Rica"; Government of Colombia, "Informe Final: Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos en Colombia"; IOM, "Flow Monitoring of Venezuelan Migration, DTM Round 2" (fact sheet, May 2018), [available online](#); IOM, "UN Migration Agency Releases First Displacement Tracking Matrix Results on Venezuelan Flows in Brazil."

It seems that growing numbers of Venezuelans with lower socioeconomic status are migrating. Though about half of emigrant respondents belong to households with higher-than-average income, 12 percent are from among the poorest in Venezuelan society. Additional data also point to ethnic diversification, with increasing numbers of indigenous people crossing Colombia's eastern border or entering the northern areas of Brazil. And while the evidence suggests that most Venezuelan migrants head for major cities in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, those in Brazil have largely sought to remain in the northern provinces along the border. The growing numbers, shifting socioeconomic profiles, and destinations of migrants have put increasing pressure on some regional governments.

Regarding employment status, 56 percent of Venezuelan respondents in Brazil were unemployed, compared to 33 percent in Colombia. Data suggest that labor-market integration is highest in Colombia. However, more than 80 percent of employed respondents in these two countries indicated that they worked in the informal sector.

One factor contributing to the prevalence of informal employment may be the unauthorized status of many Venezuelans—including 31

Notes on Data

While reliable information is available on Venezuelan departures, data are limited on population size and characteristics in host countries. This poses challenges for regional institutions, civil society, and government actors seeking to address migrant needs. Some Latin American governments—most notably Colombia and Peru—have kept relatively comprehensive records of border entries, but few have developed transparent systems that collect detailed demographic data on

percent in Brazil and 37 percent in Colombia. Other Venezuelans live in a host country on short-term tourist visas, which do not grant them the right to work; this is the case for 77 percent of those in Peru.

The concentration of Venezuelans in informal work might explain the relatively high levels of labor exploitation. A substantial share report either not being paid by their employer, or receiving less pay than was originally agreed upon; this is the case for 14 percent of respondents in Brazil, 18 percent in Colombia, and 28 percent in Peru, according to the Displacement Tracking Matrix survey. In some countries, including Peru and Panama, resentment has grown among natives who now compete with Venezuelans for work in the informal economy, for example as food vendors in the streets of Lima.

Migrants or Refugees?

The scale of the outflows has led to significant debate in the region about whether Venezuelans should be considered economic migrants or refugees. Though this movement is undoubtedly primarily economically motivated, the speed and intensity of the country's economic, political, and social implosion, largely caused by government policies, has left few sectors or areas of life unscathed. Many Venezuelans must emigrate in order to survive, due to the severe lack of food, medicines, and basic social services, as well as widespread violence, corruption, and extortion.

With a homicide rate of 89 per 100,000 inhabitants at the end of 2017, according to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, the country is the most violent in Latin America and among the most murderous in the world. Since protests against the Maduro regime intensified in 2017, human-rights violations have also become commonplace, including arbitrary arrests, torture of prisoners, attacks on journalists, and excessive use of force.

Here, it is crucial to note that most countries in the region have adopted and implemented not only the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which focuses on the protection of persecuted individuals, but also the broader 1984 Cartagena Declaration. This regional refugee framework extends the right to protection to victims of generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, mass violations of human rights, and other situations that have seriously disturbed public order. Thus, according to some legal experts, Venezuelans should be considered refugees according to Cartagena.

Since 2014, nearly 280,000 Venezuelans have applied for asylum worldwide, including 117,000 so far in 2018 alone, according to UNHCR. Peru hosts 45 percent of all Venezuelan asylum seekers, roughly 127,000 individuals, followed by the United States (68,000) and Brazil (33,000). However, Mexico is the only country in the region that has approved nearly all asylum applications by Venezuelans.

A Patchwork of Policy Responses

Venezuelan arrivals. High levels of irregular migration further exacerbate this problem.

Several institutions, including in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Peru, are actively collecting time-sensitive demographic data on Venezuelan migrants. Central to these developments has been the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) deployment of its Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), a tracking and monitoring system, in Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, and Peru. As the profile of Venezuelan migrants becomes increasingly complex, tools such as the DTM—though thus far not statistically representative—play an important role in understanding the needs of migrants, and thus in developing adequate policy responses.

Regional governments have responded to Venezuelan displacement through myriad policies and legal arrangements, within and beyond the humanitarian protection framework. As of June 2018, roughly 568,000 Venezuelans were living abroad under some form of “alternative legal stay,” according to UNHCR. These are non-asylum arrangements allowing Venezuelans to live, work, and access services in their host country for one to two years, and include temporary residence permits, employment and humanitarian visas, and channels through agreements such as Mercosur and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which both aim for regional integration.

In legal terms, Argentina and Uruguay have been the most welcoming countries in the region for Venezuelan migrants. Argentina has granted Venezuelans unrestricted visas under the Mercosur Residency Agreement, allowing them to live and work in the country for a renewable period of two years. Further, in February 2018, it eased the process for Venezuelans by extending the deadline to submit required documentation, following an observation that many were unable to produce official documents issued by their government. Uruguay has also granted legal residence to Venezuelans based on the Mercosur agreement.

Several countries have devised special legal arrangements to address Venezuelan immigration. In Peru, the Temporary Stay Permit (Permiso Temporal de Permanencia, or PTP) has granted temporary residence to Venezuelans since January 2017. However, there is a significant administrative backlog of PTP applications. By mid-June 2018, just 45,000 of the close to 350,000 Venezuelans in Peru had obtained PTP, according to Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio*. Many opt to file claims for asylum instead of a PTP in order to receive a work permit faster, which helps to explain the elevated number of asylum applications in Peru.

Colombia initially took a similar approach with its Special Stay Permit (Permiso Especial de Permanencia, or PEP), which offered temporary residence to Venezuelans who arrived between July 2017 and February 2018. As of April 2018, nearly 156,000 Venezuelans were registered under the PEP. In February 2017, Colombia started issuing Border Mobility Cards, which allowed Venezuelans to travel freely between the two countries. The government stopped granting both these cards and PEP in February 2018.

Brazil also opted to create a special permit for Venezuelans. In March 2017, it passed a resolution granting Venezuelans temporary residence for two years, similar to Argentina’s Mercosur visas. Most recently, in April 2018, Chile launched a Visa of Democratic Responsibility for Venezuelan citizens. This new visa, which can only be obtained by applying at the Chilean consulate in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas, provides potential migrants temporary residence in Chile for a one-year period. Still, there are reportedly many challenges for prospective applicants, not least the required documentation and cost.

Other countries, such as Ecuador, Mexico, and Panama, have not made any special legal arrangements for Venezuelans, opting instead to provide them legal stay using pre-existing immigration channels. This has seen mixed results. In the case of Mexico, of 912 asylum applicants who completed the process in 2017, 907 received refugee status. However, Mexico is facing a backlog in application processing, with 3,067 asylum applications out of 4,042 filed by Venezuelans that year still being processed. There have also been reports of forced returns and extortions by Mexican border officials.

Meanwhile, Ecuador theoretically grants temporary residence to Venezuelans for a period of two years through the visa scheme developed by UNASUR, or else through a 2011 bilateral agreement. However, access to these visas is severely limited in practice by their high cost, with applications costing US \$50 and the visa itself \$500.

On the other hand, Panama has implemented restrictions on Venezuelan immigration. Most notably, new legal measures in May and October 2017 added visa requirements for Venezuelan citizens and shortened the period they can stay in the country.

Implications for Regional Immigration Policy

Responses to the Venezuelan exodus must be understood in the context of what has been described as a liberal paradigm shift in Latin American immigration and asylum law and policy—as well as current regional political dynamics.

Over the past 20 years, in a wave of liberal policymaking, most Latin American countries reformed their immigration and refugee laws. These had largely been developed by military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s and had a security-focused outlook on immigration. The emphasis of the newer laws lies on migrants' rights, nondiscrimination, and the protection of vulnerable groups. Some countries even recognize a right to free human mobility, as implied by migration laws in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Uruguay, and in Ecuador's 2008 constitution. As mentioned above, virtually all countries in the region use the Cartagena definition of who is a refugee in their humanitarian protection laws.

Such policy liberalization made political sense, as long as there were large Latin American diaspora communities in the United States and Europe but few immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees within the region. Today, the politics of migration in Latin America follow a different logic. In the case of Venezuelan outflows, accepting these migrants—especially refugees—or creating special visas such as Chile's Visa of Democratic Responsibility sends an unequivocal political message against the socialist government in Caracas. Thus, such moves are especially attractive for countries now governed by conservatives, including Argentina under Mauricio Macri and Chile under Sebastián Piñera.

On the other hand, countries still aligned with the Maduro regime, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, deny the existence of a regional migration crisis. In Ecuador in particular, this denial feeds into the existing gap between human-rights law and implementation that makes life difficult for immigrants. Additionally, despite the general liberal paradigm shift, human mobility remains a national security concern for policymakers throughout the region.

Will South America begin to turn against migration as a result of the crisis? A reactionary shift toward closing borders is unlikely—except, perhaps, in the case of Colombia, which has reportedly begun deporting Venezuelans. However, other governments have also begun to crack down on migration. Brazil militarized its northern region and could start pushing people back into Venezuela, several countries have terminated special residence permits, and Mexico has deported some Venezuelans before they could file an asylum claim.

Overall, politics in the region have so far been characterized by inertia toward Venezuela's freefall, and reactions to the resulting migration crisis can best be described as ad-hoc measures. While Colombia and Peru

are calling for regional cooperation to manage the exodus, it seems that most governments in the region are too preoccupied with managing their own domestic political transitions and crises to seriously engage in coherent foreign policy responses to the Maduro regime, or to support each other in the reception and integration of the displaced Venezuelans.

Governments took a first step toward regional responsibility-sharing by assembling to discuss Venezuelan displacement via the Lima Group, a multilateral body of 14 countries (notably excluding Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua) established in late 2017 to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis. In the meantime, the exodus keeps growing by the day, increasing the pressure to find a sustainable solution to the Venezuelan drama.

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