Migration drivers, onward movement and destination choices among migrants in South America

South America hosts more than 10.9 million migrants,[1] in search of better livelihood opportunities, access to basic rights and services, and protection from violence and insecurity.[2] The vast majority (79%) originate from within the region[3] including large numbers of Venezuelan migrants hosted mainly in Colombia (2.86 million), Peru (1.54 million), Brazil (568,100), Chile (532,700), and Ecuador (444,800).[4] Across the region migrants often face barriers that hinder their integration.[5]

Based on 4Mi interviews conducted across South America, this snapshot explores the reasons why migrants leave their countries of origin, the reasons for onward movements, and which factors inform their destination selection.[6] The findings seek to provide evidence to guide responses on the ground and advocacy efforts related to the situation of migrants in the region.

Key findings

- The drivers of migration were mixed for the majority of respondents with 75% mentioning more than one reason for migrating.

- Economic reasons were the most common migration driver reported by 87% of all respondents, combined with personal or family reasons (47%), violence, insecurity and conflict (39%), lack of access to services or corruption (38%), and restricted rights and freedoms (30%).

- Most began their migration route from their country of nationality (85%), and mainly from Venezuela. However, a small share of respondents (15%) were engaging in onward movements, having started their current migration journey in a country different from their country of nationality.

- Almost all respondents (95%) indicated a preference to stay in South America, citing their intended destinations as Chile (49% of all respondents), followed by Argentina (19%), Brazil (11%), and Peru (10%).

- Destination selection (n= 1,034) is driven by economic reasons (74%), followed by the search for better living conditions (58%), family reunification (46%), and safety (43%).

Profiles

This snapshot is based on 1,046 surveys collected between 12 July and 30 September 2024 (see Map 1). Thirty-eight per cent of respondents were surveyed in Peru, 19% in Bolivia, 19% in Argentina, and 18% in Chile. Since data collection in Uruguay began in August 2024, only 5% of the surveys were conducted there. Meanwhile, less than 1% of respondents were surveyed in Brazil and Ecuador.[7]

1 IOM (2023) Movimientos migratorios recientes en América del Sur. Informe Anual 2023. Foro Especializado Migratorio del MERCOSUR y Estados Asociados (FEM).
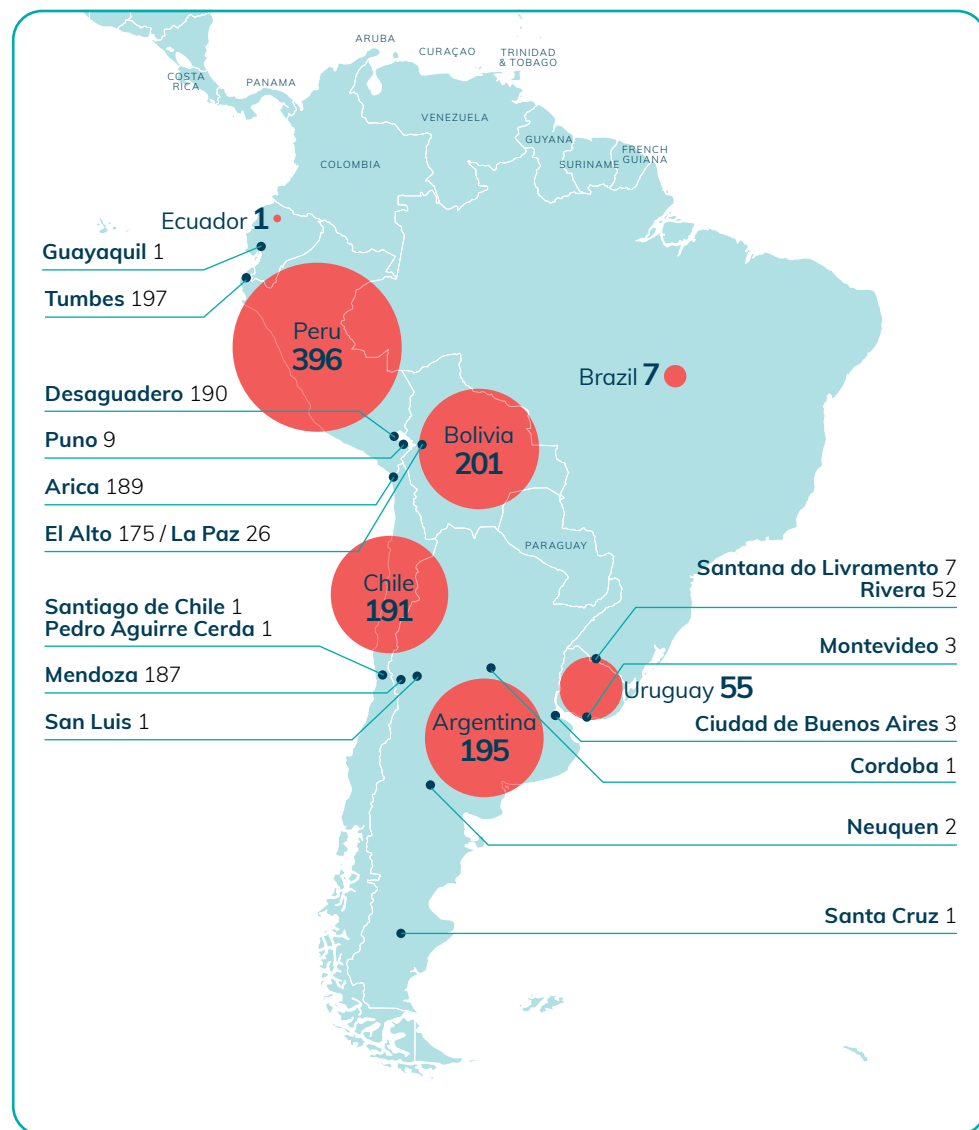2 R4V (2024) Reporte de movimientos: segundo trimestre 2024.
3 IOM (2023) Op.Cit.
4 R4V (2024) Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the region - May 2024.
5 PAHO (2023) Increased migration flow in the Americas in 2023: Challenges for migrant health and PAHO's response.
6 4Mi is MMC's main quantitative data collection project. See: MMC (n.d.) 4Mi. 4Mi uses non-probability convenience sampling, hence the data presented are illustrative and not statistically representative of the dynamics of mixed migration in the region.
7 4Mi data collection points are in Peru (Tumbes and Desaguadero, with occasional trips to Puno), Bolivia (La Paz and El Alto), Chile (Arica), Argentina (Mendoza), Uruguay (Rivera, with trips to Santa do Livramento, Brazil). The survey in Ecuador was conducted by telephone.

Map 1. Distribution of surveys by location at the time of interview

Ecuador **1**
Guayaquil 1
Tumbes 197

Peru **396**

Desaguadero 190
Puno 9
Arica 189
El Alto 175 / La Paz 26

Bolivia **201**

Brazil **7**

Chile **191**

Santiago de Chile 1
Pedro Aguirre Cerda 1
Mendoza 187
San Luis 1

Argentina **195**

Santana do Livramento 7
Rivera 52

Montevideo 3

Uruguay **55**

Ciudad de Buenos Aires 3

Cordoba 1

Neuquen 2

Santa Cruz 1

Most respondents (65%) were Venezuelans.[8] Other nationalities included Colombian (12%), Bolivian (6%), Peruvian (4%), Cuban (3%), Ecuadorian (3%), and Chilean (2%). Other intra-regional migrants,[9] made up a total of 4% of respondents.[10]

The respondents were slightly more men (57%) than women (43%). Across both genders, most respondents were between 26 and 35 years old (41%), followed by 18 to 25 years (27%), including a larger share of young men than young women under 35 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution by sex and age of people surveyed
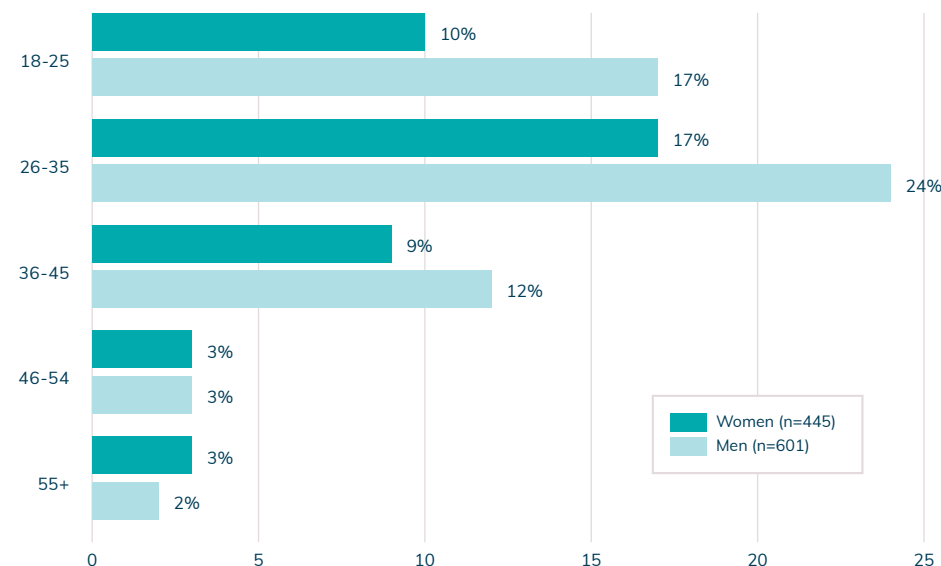
Regarding education, more than half of the respondents (53%) had completed secondary education, with 19% holding some vocational training, 16% having a university degree, 11% having completed elementary school, and 1% having not completed any schooling.

Thirty-four per cent of the respondents (n=356) were travelling with at least one child or adolescent in their care, with a higher proportion being women (67%) than men (33%).

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8   Despite the multiplicity of nationalities of the migrant population in South America, during the last few years migration has been led by Venezuelans. See: IOM and Foro Especializado Migratorio del MERCOSUR y Estados Asociados (FEM) (2022) Movimientos migratorios recientes en América del Sur. Informe anual 2022. . pp.3-4. | R4V (n.d.) Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.
9   These respondents (n=37) were from Brazil (n=14), Argentina (n=8), Paraguay (n=5), Haiti (n=3), Mexico (n=2), Nicaragua (n=2), Panama (n=1), Costa Rica (n=1), and Uruguay (n=1).
10 Less than one per cent of respondents were from outside Latin America and the Caribbean. These respondents (n=5) came from China (n=1), Nepal (n=1), Russia (n=2), and Senegal (n=1).

Desire for family reunification, frustration at government corruption and lack of services combine with economic factors to drive migration

Overall, economic reasons (reported by 87% of all respondents), personal or family reasons (47%), and violence, insecurity and conflict (39%) were the most frequent reasons given by respondents for leaving countries of origin and/or host countries (see Table 1). Lack of access to services or corruption (38%), and restricted rights and freedoms (30%) were also commonly mentioned. The majority of respondents (75%) mentioned multiple motivations for their migration, highlighting the mixed and intersecting drivers of migration in the region. Among the 25% of respondents who only mentioned a single reason for their migration (n=257), economic reasons were the most common (70%).

Table 1. Reasons for leaving the country of origin and/or host country (multi-select)

Mentions (n=1,046)	Unique (n=257)	2 reasons (n=347)	3 reasons (n=203)	4 reasons (n=89)	5 or more reasons (n=150)
Economic (n=906)	181	303	186	86	150
Personal or family reasons (n=488)	38	151	113	48	138
Violence, insecurity and conflict (n=411)	19	119	101	62	110
Culture of migration (n=175)	8	27	27	21	92
Rights and freedoms (n=316)	6	28	69	70	143
Access to services / corruption (n=394)	5	63	112	67	147
Natural disaster / environmental (n=37)	0	3	1	2	31

Among all respondents interviewed, 63% stated that they had generated income in the year prior to migrating (n=662). However, over three quarters of those who had generated income (79%) reported that it was insufficient. Among all respondents who indicated economic reasons for migrating (n=906), not earning enough income was mentioned by the majority (75%). Other economic reasons included difficulties in doing business (49%) and unemployment[11] (47%).

Among respondents who migrated for personal or family reasons (47% of all respondents, n=488), reuniting with family (73%) and friends (47%) were the most frequently mentioned drivers. Almost half of all respondents (46%) also reported personal or family reasons as one of the main factors for selecting the destination country, highlighting the importance of family and friends in migration decision-making.

Among respondents who reported limited access to services in their home or host country as a reason for migrating (38% of all respondents, n=394), government corruption (76%), as well as the lack of good health services (68%), were among the factors mentioned. However, this varied due to respondent's nationality. Among Venezuelans who reported limited access to services (n=280) government corruption (79%) was most frequently mentioned. Respondents of other nationalities (n=114) most commonly cited the lack of good educational opportunities as a factor (80%).

Integration challenges contribute to onward movement

Most respondents (85%) began their route in their country of nationality. However, a small portion (15%, n=158) reported starting their journey in a country different from their country of nationality, and as such constitute embarking on onward movements.[12] Among those embarking on onward movements, Venezuelans were the most represented (85%, n=135), mostly reporting they started their journey in Colombia (64%), Peru (11%) and Ecuador (10%).

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11 This referred to either the respondent or the main earner in the family unit being unemployed.
12 Respondents were considered to be on onward movements if the country they reported starting the journey from differed from their country of nationality. To determine the country where the current migration journey began, enumerators were instructed to consider it as the starting point if the respondent had been in the country for at least three months and felt they had attempted to integrate. If these conditions were not met, the country was considered a temporary stop and not included in this analysis.

Table 2. Country of nationality vs. country of departure (n=1,046)

Nationality \ Departure	Argentina (n=9)	Bolivia (n=66)	Brazil (n=23)	Chile (n=36)	Colombia (n=202)	Cuba (n=35)	Ecuador (n=56)	Haiti (n=3)	Paraguay (n=3)	Peru (n=56)	Venezuela (n=541)	Others (n=16)
Argentina (n=8)	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bolivia (n=65)	0	65	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brazil (n=14)	0	0	12	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chile (n=24)	0	0	0	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Colombia (n=130)	0	1	0	2	114	0	8	0	0	3	0	2
Cuba (n=36)	0	0	1	0	0	35	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ecuador (n=35)	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	0	0	0	0	0
Paraguay (n=5)	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Peru (n=39)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	38	0	0
Venezuela (n=675)	0	0	9	9	87	0	13	0	0	15	540	2
Other countries (n=15)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	12

Integration difficulties in South America have prompted some to consider onward movements from their initial host countries.[13] Among the 158 respondents who had embarked on onward movements, their main reasons for leaving their host country were economic (82%), factors related to violence, insecurity, and conflict (33%), and personal or family (31%).

About two-thirds of respondents (66%) who began their journey in a country other than that of their nationality reported that there was no action they could take to address the reason they gave for leaving. This share was somewhat lower for respondents beginning their migration from their country of origin (n=888), with about half (49%) indicating that there was nothing that they could do that might address the reasons they gave for leaving.

In Colombia, actors in the field have reported that, despite efforts to regularise migrants, this has not resulted in better living conditions for Venezuelans. Access to formal employment and education remains limited, and xenophobia and discrimination by the host community have increased.[14]

In Peru, the recent visa and passport requirements for Venezuelans,[15] as well as the expulsion of those who do not comply with the entry requirements, could generate exits from the country due to the difficulty in obtaining documents and accessing different services (housing, health, education, among others).[16]

In Ecuador, despite the new "migratory amnesty" mechanism, which exempts some Venezuelans already established in the country from paying fines for their irregular stay until April 2025, no new regularisation and integration measures have been proposed for people entering the country.[17] In addition, the country's current levels of violence and insecurity may put the lives of both the host population and migrants at risk.[18]

13 Brooks, D. (2023) Por qué los migrantes venezolanos se volvieron un asunto clave para el presidente Biden. BBC.
14 Coronado, D.A. (2024) ¿Colombia está dejando de ser atractiva para los migrantes venezolanos? El País.
15 EFE Agency. (2024) Perú comienza a exigir visa y pasaporte a todos los ciudadanos venezolanos. | Instituto Nacional de Estadística Informática (2023) Encuesta a la Población Venezolana residente en el Perú.
16 Calderón, C. (2024) Cierre de embajada de Venezuela en Perú: ¿qué pasará con el trámite que realizaron los venezolanos para obtener la visa peruana?
17 Cañizares, A. M (2024) Ecuador define "amnistía migratoria" para ciertos venezolanos en el país. ¿Cómo será? CNN.
18 Prensa Latina (2024). Nueva ola de violencia eleva preocupación de ciudadanos en Ecuador.

Almost all migrants interviewed intend to stay in South America

The vast majority of respondents (95%) indicated their preferred destination was within the South American region. Almost half of all respondents (49%) reported Chile as a preferred destination, followed by Argentina (19%), Brazil (11%), and Peru (10%), among others (see Map 2). Only 4% of all respondents reported an intended destination beyond South America, such as the United States.

Map 2. Main countries of destination

Note: Countries listed under others (n=38) are United States of America (n=24), Spain (n=4), Canada (n=3), Australia (n=1), Colombia (n=1), Mexico (n=1), New Zealand (n=1), Paraguay (n=1), Europe (without specifying a country) (n=1) and Other=1.

Economic reasons, better living conditions, family reunion and safety all factor into destination selection

Economic reasons (74%), followed by the search for better living conditions (58%), family reunification (46%), and safety (43%) were primary factors in destination selection (n=1,034).[19]

For those selecting Chile as a preferred destination (n=515), 81% mentioned economic reasons, and 57% indicated generally better living standards as factors influencing their decision making. The desire to reunite with family was also cited by 45% of respondents intending to reach Chile, while the 43% selected it due to it being considered it a safe destination.

Reuniting with family (64%) was the primary reason respondents indicated for selecting Argentina as an intended destination (n=200), followed closely by economic opportunities (55%) and generally better living standards (50%).

Among those intending to reach Brazil (n=111), economic opportunities were the most common reason (83%) in their destination selection, followed by generally better living standards (75%), safety considerations (58%).

Respondents with Peru as their preferred destination (n=105) most commonly cited safety (67%), economic opportunities (61%) and generally better living standards (56%) as the primary reasons for their choice.

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19 People could choose more than one option. Only people who had defined their country of destination or had already arrived there were asked this question.

The factors influencing destination selection among respondents suggest a potential disconnect between their expectations and the realities they face once they arrive. Many host countries in the region are facing significant challenges in ensuring socioeconomic integration for a large number of migrants. These challenges are compounded by high levels of informality, restrictive labour markets and rising levels of xenophobia and hate speech, which undermine efforts to ensure socioeconomic integration and protect migrants' rights.[20]

MMC´s understanding of mixed migration

Mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people engaged in mixed migration have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Mixed migration describes migrants travelling along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.

4Mi data collection

4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Eastern and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

20 See: Arroyave, L. (2024) Desafíos para América Latina y el Caribe en la gestión y protección de los derechos de las personas migrantes. Dejusticia. | Dupraz-Dobias, P. (2024) Latin America makes it harder for Venezuelan refugees as xenophobia mounts. The New Humanitarian. | Grupo Banco Mundial (2024) Barreras y facilitadores de la integración de la población migrante y refugiada en Chile. | Ferrer, L. (2024) Alerta ante la criminalización de la población migrante. (p.12). | Rangel, C. (2024) La esperanza verdea-marilla de los migrantes venezolanos ya no es tan rosa. Correo del Caroní. | Cépeda, M (2024) A dos años del proyecto Del Desplazamiento a la Integración. Apuntes sobre los desafíos para migrantes de Venezuela en Perú. IDEHPUCP.