

Understanding the motivations and aspirations behind Colombian emigration

This infographic presents data collected by 4Mi on the drivers and aspirations of Colombians who have left Colombia and are currently in transit across the Americas. The aim of this document is to contribute to the development of a robust evidence base on Colombian migration — a topic that has seen limited recent research and is often overlooked — in order to inform operational responses on the ground and support advocacy efforts concerning the situation of migrants in the region.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION SITES:

Chile (Arica, Arauco and Santiago de Chile, n=161), Bolivia (La Paz and El Alto, n=117), Peru (Desaguadero and Tumbes, n=104), Mexico (Mexico City and Tijuana, n=41), Argentina (Ciudad de Buenos Aires and Mendoza, n=35), Costa Rica (Ciudad Neily, Paso Canoas and San Jose, n=21), Uruguay (Rivera and Montevideo, n=10), Ecuador (Guayaquil, n=1) and Brazil (Santana do Livramento n=1).¹

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD:

12 July 2024 – 31 March 2025.²

METHODOLOGY:

In-person and telephone surveys

SAMPLE SIZE:

491 Colombian refugees and migrants who started their migration journey in Colombia.

Background

- **Colombia recorded its highest inflation rate in 23 years** in 2023 (13.12%),³ significantly increasing the cost of living in the country. Although inflation has since declined (reaching 5.2% by the end of 2024),⁴ the cost of essential services such as education and utilities, including water, electricity, and gas, continued to rise between 2023 and 2024 (+10.7 % and +8.5%,⁵ respectively).
- In 2024, **the humanitarian situation in Colombia reached its most critical level in the past eight years**, mainly due to the ongoing armed conflict.⁶ That year saw a significant increase in incidents of confinement (+102% of reports), harm caused by explosive devices (+89%), and mass forced displacement (+34%) compared to 2023.⁷
- In 2022, Colombia broke its record for net emigration, with over 547,000 nationals leaving the country through regular channels⁸ — a 70% increase compared to the average annual levels before 2020.⁹ Although departures decreased in 2024 (305,000),¹⁰ it was estimated that **more than 1,000 Colombians per day were leaving the country** intending to settle abroad.¹¹
- Between 2021 and 2024, **the number of Colombians migrating to Central and North America by crossing irregularly the Darién Gap increased by over 10,000%**, rising from 169 in 2021 to 17,529 in 2024. Colombians became the second most common nationality making this crossing, after Venezuelans, surpassing migrants from Haiti, Ecuador, and China in 2024.¹²
- At the US's southern border, "encounters" with Colombians increased steadily up to 2023, rising from 400 in 2019¹³ to 154,000 in 2023,¹⁴ the highest number recorded to date.
- Southward migration of Colombians within the continent has also increased in recent years. In 2024, **163,000 Colombians entered Chile** through regular channels, 17,000 more than in 2023 (+11%) and 38,000 more than in 2022 (+24%).¹⁵ These figures do not include irregular entries.
- Colombians also ranked 5th in terms of asylum applications in the European Union for the last two years, with 62,454 applications in 2023 and 52,621 in 2024.¹⁶

Respondents profiles

Gender



Note: The 4Mi sample is purposive. Therefore, the data presented in this infographic should not be considered representative of mixed migration dynamics in the region.

Profiles

- 42% of respondents were between 26 and 35 years old.
- **34% (n=168)** of respondents were **travelling with at least one child** in their care at the time of the interview, 53% of whom were women.
- 96% (n=474) of respondents completed some level of education, including secondary school (44%), vocational training (28%), primary school (13%), or a university degree (11%).
- Before leaving Colombia, 80% of respondents lived in urban areas, while 20% lived in rural areas.



1. The surveys in Guayaquil (Ecuador), Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Montevideo (Uruguay) were conducted by phone.

2. Data in Mexico and Costa Rica were collected until March 24, 2025.

3. SWI (2023). [Colombia cerró 2022 con una inflación del 13.12 %, la más alta en 23 años](#).

4. Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia (2025). [¿Por qué todo está más caro? Entendamos la inflación en Colombia](#).

5. Ibid.

6. CICR (2025). [Humanitarian Report 2025 - Colombia](#).

7. Ibid.

8. Loidor, W. E. (2024). [La actual complejidad migratoria colombiana en un doble contexto post-acuerdo y post-Covid: retos y preguntas](#).

9. Infobae (2025). [Colombia rompe récords de turistas, pero más ciudadanos huyen, estas son las cifras de la migración](#).

10. Migración Colombia (2025). [Migration flows](#).

11. Infobae (2024). [Más de 1.000 personas se van de Colombia para no volver, así están las cifras en 2024](#).

12. National Migration Service of Panama (2025). [Tránsito irregular por Darién](#).

13. U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2024). [CBP Encounters](#).

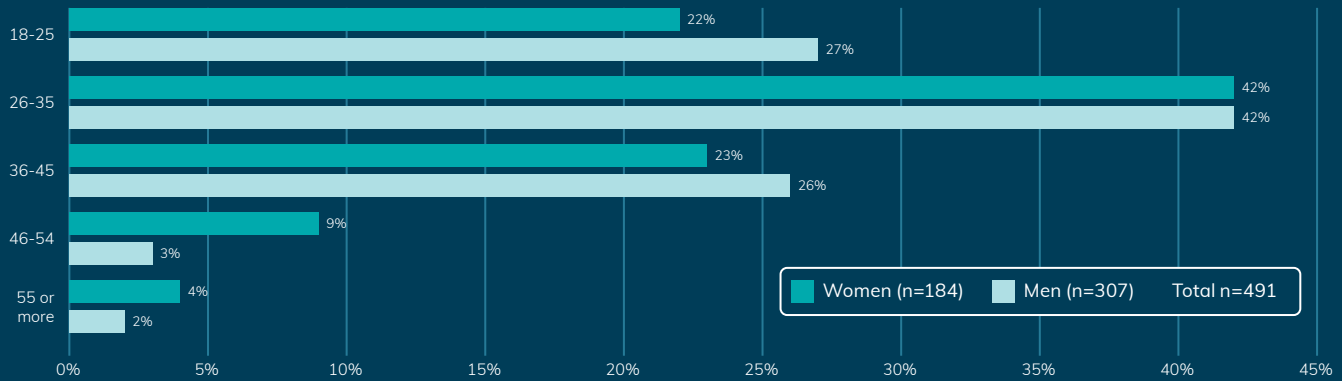
14. U.S. Custom and Border Protection (2025). [U.S. Border Patrol and Office of Field Operations Encounters by Area of Responsibility and Component](#).

15. Government of Chile (2025). [Llegadas de Turistas Extranjeros a Chile según Nacionalidad o Paso Fronterizo. Serie enero 2008 – enero 2025](#).

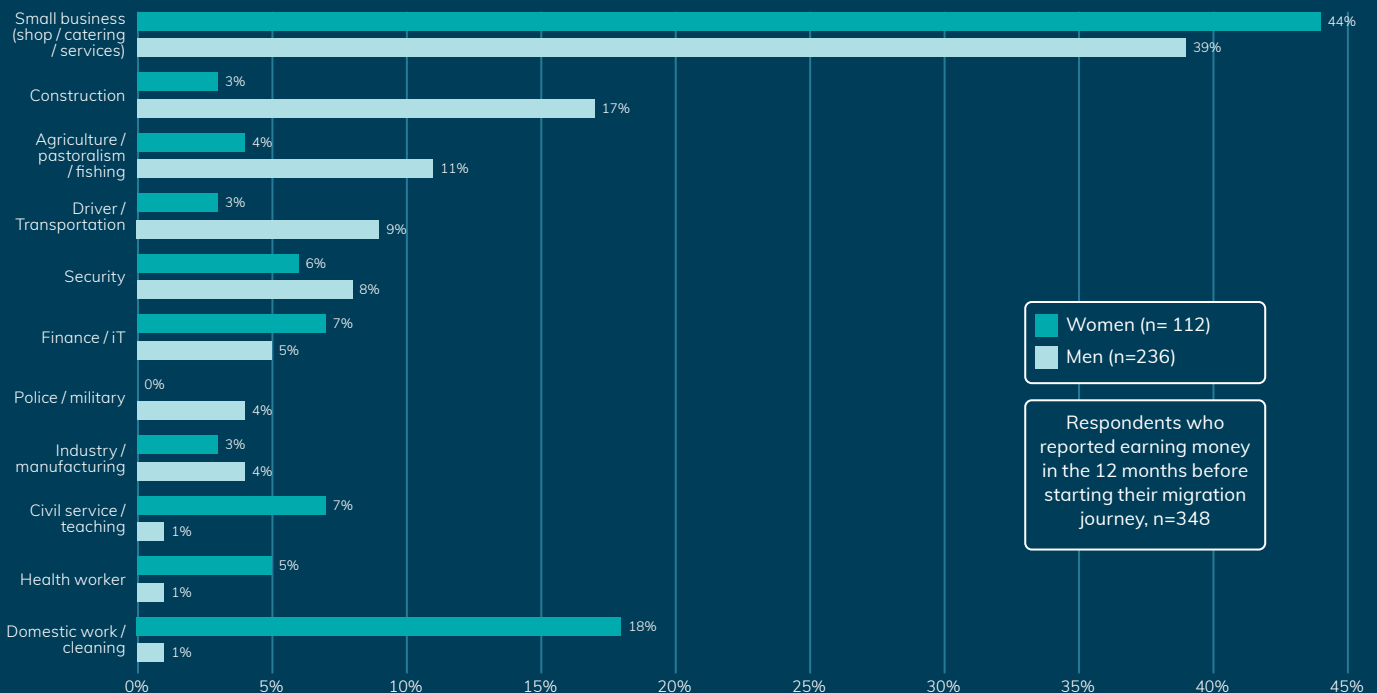
16. EUAA (2024). [Latest Asylum Trends](#).

Respondents profiles

Age



In what sector were you earning an income before beginning your migration journey?



“ I left my country due to armed conflicts involving organised armed groups. I was constantly being extorted, and my family was similarly threatened. For this reason, I decided to leave for Argentina in search of a better future and to safeguard my life. ”

24-year-old Colombian man interviewed in Bolivia

Key findings

- 71% (n=348) of respondents **were making money in the 12 months before starting their migration journey**, of which 41% did so through occasional or casual work. The lack of labour guarantees in these jobs, many of which are informal (by January 2025, 56% of the labour sector in Colombia was informal),¹⁷ creates uncertainty, exposes individuals to earning less than the legal minimum, and may leave them without social security coverage (health and pension fund).
- Women reported more domestic work / cleaning compared to men** (+17pp). According to secondary sources, 93% of domestic work in Colombia is performed by women, and 82% of it is informal,¹⁸ which severely limits job security, access to basic health services and pension funds for this population.
- Among respondents who were not earning an income in the 12 months before starting their journey** (29% of all respondents, n=142), **the main reason cited was unemployment** (74%). By the end of 2024, Colombia's national unemployment rate stood at 9.1%, representing approximately 2.3 million unemployed individuals.¹⁹

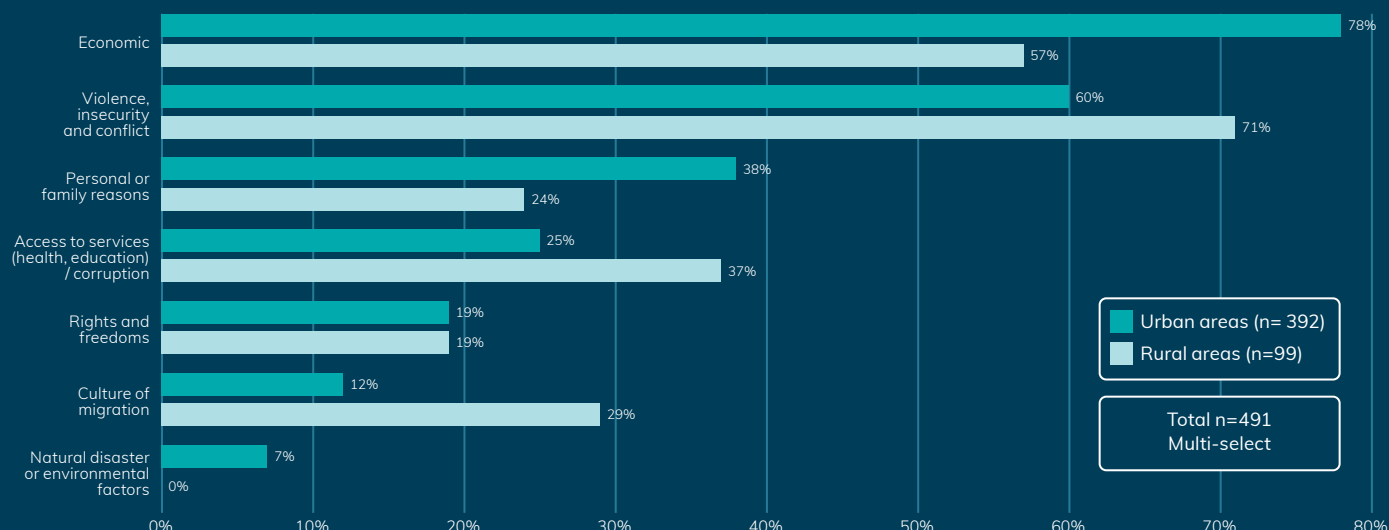
17. DANE (2025). [Empleo informal y seguridad social. Información noviembre 2024 – enero 2025](#).

18. ILO (2024). [Formalizar el trabajo doméstico debe ser una prioridad en la agenda por la igualdad en Colombia: OIT](#).

19. Portafolio (2025). [Desempleo en Colombia cerró el 2024 en 9.1% y muy cerca del estancamiento](#).

Reasons for leaving Colombia

Reasons for leaving by last area of residence in Colombia



We lived in an area where armed conflict and criminal gangs were part of daily life. The constant threats, the fear of clashes, and the violence surrounding us made us feel that our lives had no future. (...) We decided to go to the United States in the hope of finding not only safety, but also new opportunities for my children.



37-year-old Colombian woman interviewed in Mexico

Key findings

- Colombian migration is heavily influenced by the combined impact of economic factors and violence. Forty-one per cent of respondents cited a combination of at least these two reasons as their primary motivation for leaving the country. Among those who indicated economic reasons (74% of all respondents, n=363), **82% reported that they were not earning enough in their previous employment**. Colombia has the seventh-lowest minimum wage in Latin America,²⁰ which significantly restricts household purchasing power, particularly in urban areas, where the cost of living tends to be higher.
- Sixty-two per cent of all respondents**—and within that group, 71% of those living in rural areas—**left the country due to violence, insecurity, and conflict**. As of 2024, Colombia was experiencing eight active internal armed conflicts, primarily affecting border and rural regions.²¹ That same year, the country recorded the **second-highest number of forced displacements (180,000 people)** since 2016—the year the Peace Agreement was signed with the now-defunct guerilla group FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia).²² In urban areas, violence continues to drive people to migrate internally in search of safety. In 2024, **reports of threats and extortion rose** compared to the previous year (by 35% and 20% respectively), with the majority of cases concentrated in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla, and Villavicencio.²³
- Lack of access to services and corruption were more frequently reported by those who had lived in rural areas** than those in urban areas (+12pp). Corruption obstructs access to essential services and deepens the exclusion experienced in rural areas,²⁴ where disparities in the availability, accessibility, and quality of education,²⁵ water, and sanitation²⁶ are more pronounced. These gaps significantly undermine the quality of life for rural populations.
- Natural disasters and environmental factors**, as migration drivers, **were more frequently reported by Colombians compared to other nationalities** surveyed by 4Mi (+3pp at the global level).²⁷ Environmental phenomena, such as El Niño, exposed 2.9 million people in 2024 to droughts and water shortages in Colombia,²⁸ affecting urban areas—such as Bogotá—which typically face less impact from environmental factors. However, within our sample, respondents who lived in urban areas more frequently reported natural disasters and environmental factors than those who lived in rural areas (+7pp). This has increased the likelihood of both internal and external displacement.

20. El Tiempo (2025). [Este es el rango de edad de la mayoría de colombianos que abandonan el país: 'Me fui por falta de oportunidades'](#).

21. OCHA (2025a). [Colombia Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Update](#).

22. OCHA (2025b). [Informe - Tendencias e Impacto Humanitario en Colombia 2024 | Datos compilados entre enero - diciembre de 2024](#).

23. Pares (2024). [Balance de seguridad en Colombia 2024](#).

24. Transparencia por Colombia (2021). [Así se mueve la corrupción: radiografía de la corrupción 2016-2020](#).

25. Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (2023). [Informe análisis estadístico LEE](#).

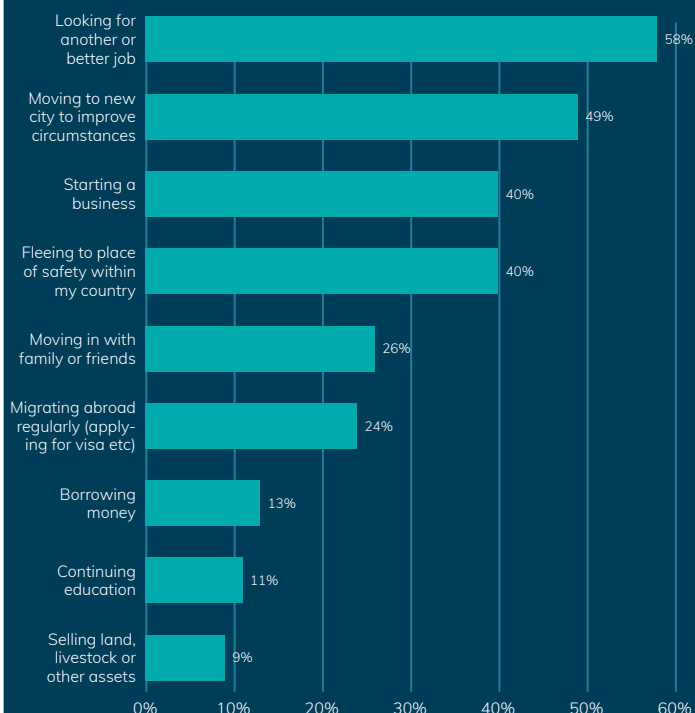
26. Así Vamos en Salud (2025). [Índice de Salud Rural \(ISR\)](#).

27. Access the general 4Mi data here: <https://mixedmigration.org/latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

28. OCHA (2025a). Op. Cit.

Alternatives to migration

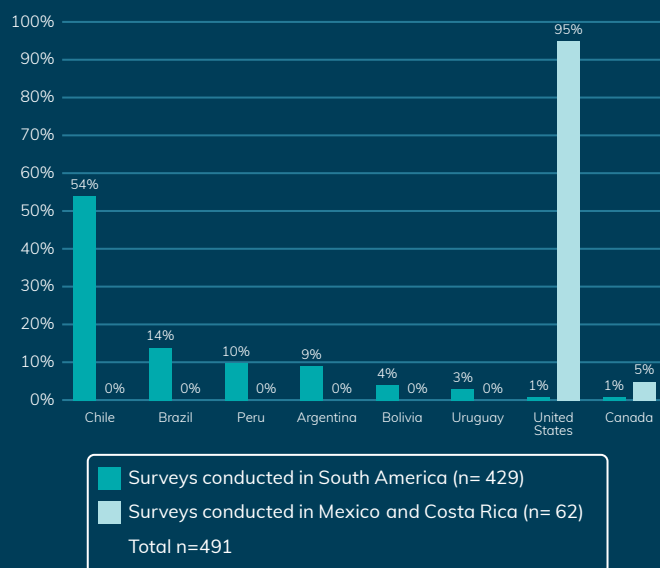
Alternative solutions tried by respondents



Respondents who believed there were alternatives they could try in Colombia to resolve the issues that motivated their departure from the country, n=276 multi-select.

Intentions

Destination country by survey application area* **



*4% of the remaining destinations for surveys conducted in South America correspond to Spain (n=5), unspecified European countries (n=3), respondents who had not yet selected a destination (n=7), and those who refused to answer the question (n=2).

** Given the small sample sizes for the surveys conducted in Mexico and Costa Rica (n=62), the results for these countries should be treated with caution.



We had to move to Medellin because they were following me to kill me (...) My dream was to learn more, go to Canada, Spain, or the United States to improve my situation and be able to help my community.



37-year-old Colombian woman interviewed in Costa Rica

Key findings

- Of those who migrated due to violence, insecurity, and conflict, and considered other options before leaving the country (36% of all respondents, n=178), **58% attempted to move to another city** to improve their circumstances, and/or **54% sought refuge in a place considered safer** within the country. In 2024, people forcibly displaced within Colombia primarily originated from Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño, Bolivar, Antioquia, and Norte de Santander.²⁹
- Among those who migrated for economic reasons and considered alternatives before migrating (43% of all respondents, n=211), **65% considered looking for another job**, and **45% thought about starting a business**. High levels of unemployment and inflation act as significant barriers to improving people's economic situation, prompting many to migrate to other countries in search of better opportunities.
- All respondents interviewed in Mexico and Costa Rica had North America as their destination (95% to the US and 5% to Canada). Since the implementation of new migration restrictions in the US,³⁰ **migration movements in the region have drastically changed**, resulting in return movements from North and Central America towards the south of the continent.³¹ In March 2025, 4Mi surveyed 86 Colombians who were returning south.³² Among the reasons for their return, they cited **the suspension of the US's regular migration mechanisms** (71 out of 86) and **the perception that migration to the north was no longer viable** (54 out of 86).
- 96% (n=411) of respondents surveyed in South America intend to remain in a country within the region. **The free movement agreements** between the member states of the Andean Community and MERCOSUR, which eliminate requirements such as visas and passports, **facilitate regional mobility, especially for Colombians**.

29. CICR (2025). Op. Cit.

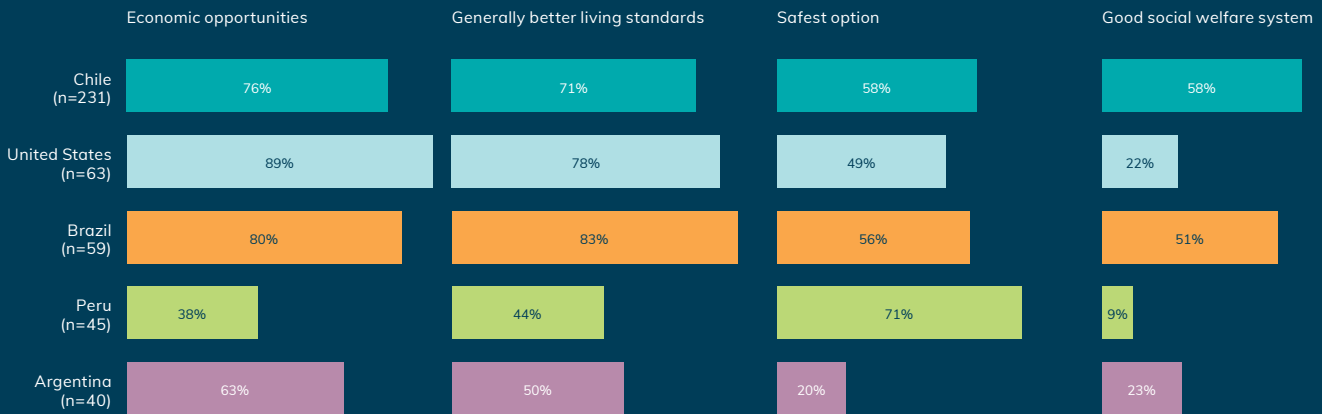
30. BBC (2025). [Six big immigration changes under Trump - and their impact so far](#).

31. El País (2025). [Un éxodo a la inversa: cerca de un centenar de migrantes regresa cada día a Colombia desde Estados Unidos y México](#).

32. 4Mi collected information in Mexico, Costa Rica and Colombia about people who began their migration journey from Central and North America toward South America in March 2025. For this infographic, only the 4Mi data corresponding to Colombians was used.

Intentions

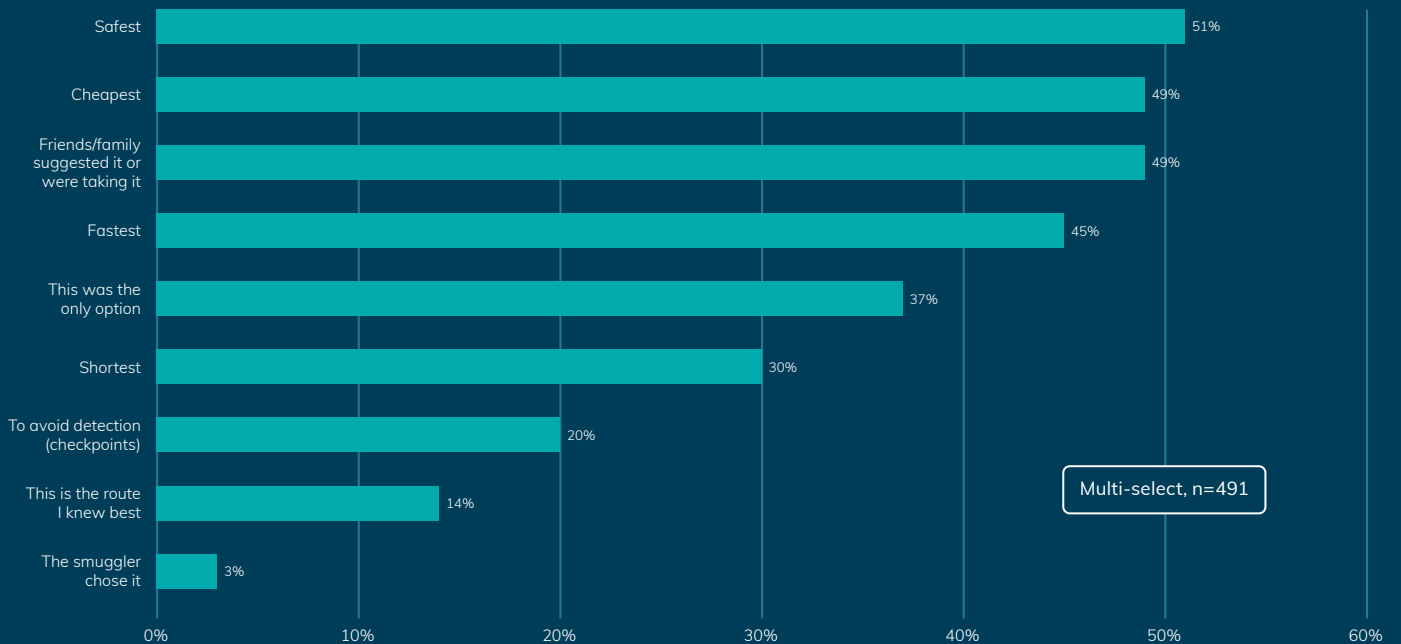
Reasons for choosing the destination, by main destination countries*



* Given the small sample sizes for the United States (n=63), Brazil (n=59), Peru (n=45), and Argentina (n=40), the results for these countries should be treated with caution.

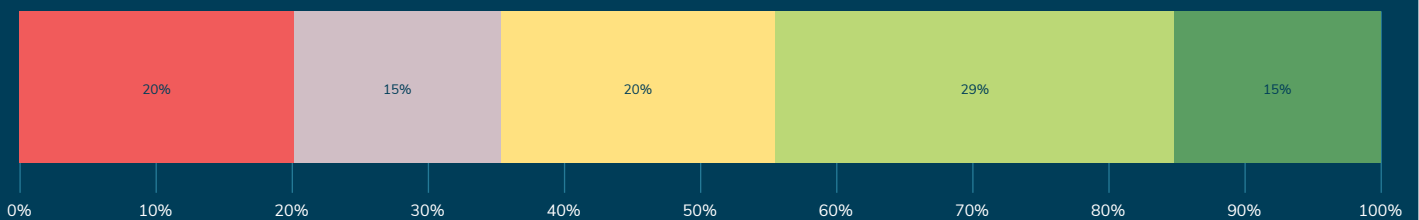
Multi-select

Why did you take this route?



Multi-select, n=491

Do you intend to apply for asylum?



No Don't know Yes, but I don't know when or where yet Yes, at the end of my journey Yes, I already have

n=491

Key findings

- The majority of respondents (71%) selected their destination based on economic opportunities. Stronger currencies, employment opportunities, and higher incomes motivate destination choices, especially for those sending remittances to Colombia to support their families. Remittance flows to Colombia have grown by 17.2% annually from 2021 to October 2024.³³
- Nearly half of the respondents (49%) selected their route because they considered it the cheapest option. Colombia has the second-highest air ticket sales tax in Latin America.³⁴ This, combined with economic difficulties, leads people to choose land routes as they are cheaper.
- 20% of respondents selected their route to avoid detection (migration checkpoints), which contrasts with the right to free movement in the region for Colombians. **Lack of awareness about their rights, the loss of identity documents, and the composition of travel groups** with nationalities that face greater restrictions—such as Venezuelans—lead people to take irregular and more dangerous routes.
- Of the individuals who left the country due to violence, insecurity, and conflict (62%, n=305), 54% intended to seek asylum at some point along their route, and 20% had already applied. **Victims of armed conflict may migrate in search of protection in other countries.** As of August 2024, at least 31,000 Colombians who were victims of armed conflict were living abroad, primarily in the US (18.8%), Ecuador (16.4%), Canada (12.7%), and Chile (10.3%).³⁵
- The majority of respondents heading to the US intended to apply for asylum at some point along the journey (45 out of 63). **The termination of the Safe Mobility Offices³⁶ and the closure of the CBP One app, as well as the end of the possibility of applying for asylum at the border³⁷, puts migrants with international protection needs at risk**, forcing them to change their travel plans. Of the 86 returning Colombians surveyed by 4Mi, 84 were heading back to Colombia, one to Panama, and one to Ecuador.

33. Corfi Colombiana (2024). [El boom de las remesas en Colombia](#).

34. Forbes Colombia (2024). [Argentina y Colombia tienen las tasas más altas para tiquetes aéreos en Latinoamérica ¿Por qué es más caro volar en el país?](#)

35. Unidad para las Víctimas (2024). [Conmemoración Colombiano Migrante](#).

36. CBS News (2025). [Trump officials closing immigration offices Biden set up in Latin America](#).

37. BBC (2025). Op. Cit.



Funded by
European Union
Humanitarian Aid



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

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 migration and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

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



mixedmigration.org



@mixedmigration



@Mixed_Migration



[mixedmigration-centre](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mixedmigration-centre)



Subscribe to our
newsletter



info@mixedmigration.org