



Migration dynamics and protection risks in north-south return movements in the Americas

Impacts of changes in U.S. migration policy

Research Report, May 2025



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Venezuelan migrant families, along with their children, carry their belongings after arriving at Lajas Blancas in Panama, having crossed the Darien jungle. July 2024.

In 2025, under the new U.S. administration, crossings north through the Darién jungle have drastically decreased, and many migrants are redirecting their routes.

Acknowledgements

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About ProLAC

ProLAC is a regional information management initiative created by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) with the support of the European Union - Humanitarian Aid. The initiative, operating with the collaboration of national and international humanitarian organisations, offers a harmonised protection monitoring system in Latin America and the Caribbean. The initiative, which operates in collaboration with national and international humanitarian organisations, offers a harmonised protection monitoring system in Latin America and the Caribbean, serving as an evidence base for improving protection and humanitarian responses more effectively and efficiently at the regional, national, and local levels.

For more information about the ProLAC Initiative or to consult our interactive dashboard, visit: prolac.live

About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists and the broader humanitarian sector.

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Main findings | 5 |
| Part A - Return dynamics towards South America | 5 |
| Part B – Refugees and migrants in the region and protection risks | 5 |
| Key terminology | 6 |
| 1. Introduction | 7 |
| 2. Context | 8 |
| 2.1. The new U.S. Administration: updates on migration policy and foreign policy | 8 |
| 2.2. Shifts in migration dynamics in the region | 9 |
| 2.3. Effects on the rights of refugees and migrants | 10 |
| 3. Return dynamics towards South America | 11 |
| 3.1. Methodology: the 4Mi initiative | 11 |
| 3.1.1 Quantitative data collection | 11 |
| 3.1.2. Qualitative data collection | 12 |
| 3.2. 4Mi findings | 12 |
| 3.2.1. Profiles of refugees and migrants having returned or returning | 12 |
| 3.2.2. Reasons for self-initiated return | 12 |
| 3.2.3. Countries of departure for return migration | 14 |
| 3.2.4. Main routes and dynamics of return | 15 |
| 3.2.5. Destination countries | 21 |
| 3.2.6. Future intentions of the returning refugees and migrants | 23 |
| 4. Persons in transit who are stranded and risks of return to countries in the region | 25 |
| 4.1. Methodology: ProLAC Initiative | 25 |
| 4.1.1. Quantitative data collection | 25 |
| 4.1.2. Qualitative data collection | 26 |
| 4.2. ProLAC's findings | 26 |
| 4.2.1. Protection risks | 26 |
| 4.2.2. Protection risks: restrictions to access international protection | 29 |
| 4.2.3. Risks and conditions of return to destination countries in the region | 30 |
| 5. Conclusions | 35 |
| 6. Recommendations | 36 |

Main findings

Part A - Return dynamics towards South America

- The changes to the United States (U.S.) migration policy implemented since late January 2025 have significantly impacted migration dynamics across the region. These shifts have resulted in a notable increase in Latin American refugees and migrants who, having seen their plans to reach the U.S. disrupted, have initiated return movements towards Latin America.
- These return movements began primarily in Mexico and Central American countries, key points along the northbound migration route, where the majority of 4Mi survey respondents had an irregular migration status (97%). 4Mi survey respondents predominantly selected South American countries as their destination (95%), mostly Colombia and Venezuela. The destinations chosen do not always correspond to the individual's country of nationality: 41% of respondents were travelling to a country different from their own, primarily because they had previously migrated there.
- The land routes used by returnees largely mirror those they initially followed when migrating northward. However, important changes in routes have been observed: there has been increased use of air travel, as well as growing use of maritime routes between Panama and Colombia.
- Given the rapid implementation of U.S. policy changes and the abrupt nature of return for most refugees and migrants, many returnees lack clarity about their future plans. According to 4Mi data, 42% of respondents did not know what they would do upon arrival in their destination, while 10% stated they intended to stay only temporarily before migrating again.

Part B – Refugees and migrants in the region and protection risks

- Changes in U.S. migration policy have created significant obstacles to access to international protection. By cancelling the application process through which individuals with international protection needs could request an appointment to enter the U.S. and present their case, the reimplementing of the "Remain in Mexico" policy, and efforts to militarize the border to restrict access to the territory, the U.S. is limiting the right to seek asylum and is violating the principle of *non-refoulement*. 66% of the total households surveyed by ProLAC while in transit and in destinations had not requested asylum, even though they mentioned reasons for leaving their countries of origin that align with criteria set out in the Cartagena Declaration and the 1951 Refugee Convention, indicating international protection needs.
- Given the limited access to U.S. territory and the tightening of migration policies, many persons who were *en route* to the north now remain stranded in transit countries. Within ProLAC's protection monitoring data, there was a 22% increase in stranded households from November and December 2024 to March 2025, with just over 70% of households in transit being left stranded in Central America and Mexico. Other sources, such as The New Humanitarian in Mexico, report that "thousands of persons who remain in Tapachula lack the documentation or resources to do anything other than wait." The same outlet notes that these persons cannot leave the country, and returning to their country of origin is not easy either.
- The main destination countries in the region —such as Colombia, Ecuador and Peru— lack accessible and affordable regularisation processes. This leaves persons in a situation of greater vulnerability, with limited opportunities for integration. In some of these countries, including Colombia and Ecuador, there are serious situations of violence or conflict that could affect the reception and integration of persons who plan to return or who have already returned.

Key terminology

For this report, the following definitions apply:

Return: The act or process of going back or being brought back to the starting point of one's migration journey. In the context of mixed migration in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and for the purposes of this report, *return* refers to refugees and migrants who had migrated or were in transit to the U.S. and have returned or are currently moving in the opposite direction (north–south) to countries in Latin America, either a country of origin or to a third country.

There are multiple modes of return, including:

- **Self-initiated return:** A return undertaken without external assistance from states or other entities. In the current context, many refugees and migrants are returning in this way due to the lack of viable migration alternatives.
- **Assisted voluntary return (AVR):** Return organised and funded by governments or international organisations, and undertaken “voluntarily” by refugees and migrants. Despite the term, the degree of voluntariness in this type of return has long been debated, as such measures are often implemented to increase return rates in contexts where deportation is not feasible.¹
- **Deportation (forced return):** The act of involuntarily sending someone back to their place of origin, transit or a third country, usually based on administrative or judicial decisions and carried out by States.

Country returning from: The country where the refugee or migrant began their return journey, i.e., where they made the decision to return or from where they were deported.

Country of destination (for return): The country the refugee or migrant aspires to reach or has reached as part of their return, regardless of whether it is the country of origin or a third country.

People at destination: Refugees and migrants who intend to remain in the country where they are currently located and, at the time of the survey, do not plan to continue their journey to another country.

People in transit: Refugees and migrants on the move between countries with the intention of reaching a certain destination.

Stranded people: Refugees and migrants who were in transit but, at the time of the survey, remain in a transit country for longer than expected or desired due to circumstances beyond their control. In the current context, common reasons include lack of financial resources, mobility restrictions due to border closures, waiting for a scheduled appointment in their migration process in the destination country, or the inability to continue travelling due to uncertainty caused by recent migration policy changes, among other factors.

¹ See: Leerkes, A., van Os, R. and Boersema E. (2017) [What drives 'soft deportation'? Understanding the rise in Assisted Voluntary Return among rejected asylum seekers in the Netherlands](#); Gauci, J. (2020) [Externalisation of Borders. Detention practices and denial of the right to asylum](#).

1. Introduction

The recent changes in U.S. migration policies have caused a series of disruptions in the migration dynamics of the region and have had significant impacts on refugees and migrants. Many refugees and migrants who were travelling toward the United States (U.S.) have experienced abrupt interruptions in their journeys and have been forced to reconsider their plans. In general terms, they face two main options if they do not want to remain in the country in which they find themselves: attempt to enter the U.S. irregularly despite significant obstacles or embark on a journey toward a new destination. So far, attempts to cross into the U.S. appear to be relatively limited,² while a growing number of refugees and migrants seem to be actively redirecting their journeys toward alternative destinations.³

This report analyses the dynamics and conditions of refugees and migrants who are returning or have returned in the north-south direction, as well as those who are stranded. It has been jointly created by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) and the ProLAC Initiative, based on data collected between January and March 2025 in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Peru.⁴ The report does not analyse the situation of individuals deported and expelled as a result of new U.S. policies.

The current context remains dynamic. MMC and ProLAC recognise that the changes in U.S. migration policy —and their impacts— continue to unfold as this report is being written. Nonetheless, this study aims to generate evidence of these emerging and under-researched situations,⁵ with the goal of shedding light on these new migration trends and providing a solid foundation that contributes to informing the humanitarian and state response programmes regarding the current regional situation.

The report presents a glossary of key terms relevant to the north-south return migration in the Americas, followed by a contextual overview of the recent changes in U.S. migration policy under the new federal administration. The main content of the report is divided into two parts:

- The first part presents MMC's analysis of return dynamics to South America, based primarily on quantitative data collected through its 4Mi⁶ project. This section includes profiles of refugees and migrants who have returned or are in the process of returning, the reasons behind these movements, the main routes taken —including starting points and points of destination—, as well as the future intentions of these refugees and migrants once they reach their country of return.
- The second part presents ProLAC's specific analysis, which is an in-depth examination of the implications and risks of the new migration policies for refugees and migrants in different contexts. This includes those who are returning or are stranded in transit countries, the barriers to accessing international protection, and the risks associated with migration to South American countries that are emerging as the main return destinations.

Both sections incorporate qualitative information collected by both initiatives, as well as analysis of secondary sources.

The report concludes with a section of findings and recommendations, where the main challenges are identified, and concrete actions are proposed to strengthen the protection of refugees and migrants by humanitarian and governmental actors in the current regional context.

2 MMC (2025a) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean, Quarter 1, 2025](#).

3 Swissinfo (2025) [Flujo migratorio inverso: venezolanos renuncian a EE.UU. pero no a la idea de otra vida](#). | Nomesqui Rivera, J. (2025) [El sueño americano se apaga para miles de migrantes que deben volver por el tapón del Darién: "Ya no hay esperanza"](#). Infobae. | Díaz, D. (2025) [Familias migrantes colombovenezolanas varadas en México: "Ayúdenos a regresar"](#). El Espectador.

4 For more details on the information collection processes, see sections: Methodology: 4Mi Initiative and Methodology: ProLAC Initiative.

5 Guerra, G. (2025) [What early data reveals about "reverse migration"](#). Niskanen Center.

6 4Mi is MMC's main quantitative data collection project. 4Mi questionnaires include information on why individuals undertook a migration project, destination choices, influences on decision-making, and other topics ([global data](#) and [Latin America and the Caribbean data](#) can be accessed through the [4Mi Interactive](#) dashboards). The survey implemented for this report is a version of the standard survey specifically adapted for the north-south return theme.

2. Context

The U.S. has historically been a major destination for global migration.⁷ Over the past five decades, the country has become the world's primary destination for international migration.⁸ Despite being a global destination, due to its proximity and border with Mexico, a significant portion of those who have arrived in the U.S. come from Latin America and the Caribbean, especially from Mexico, but also from El Salvador, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Colombia and, more recently, Venezuela.⁹

In response to the sustained increase in the arrival of refugees and migrants, as well as irregular entries, especially over the past two decades,¹⁰ U.S. immigration policies have progressively tightened. Particularly since 2001, in the context following September 11, restrictions on entry, regularisation and international protection were intensified, increasingly criminalising migration.¹¹

However, during this period, restrictive measures coexisted with some regular entry pathways, regularisation programmes for migrants, and protection mechanisms for asylum seekers and refugees.¹² This situation changed drastically in the early months of 2025 with the arrival of the new U.S. administration.¹³

2.1. The new U.S. Administration: updates on migration policy and foreign policy

Since taking office at the end of January 2025, the new U.S. administration has issued over 20 executive orders that significantly tighten the country's migration policy.¹⁴ These measures strengthen restrictions on entry and the regularisation of migrants, limit temporary protection programmes and access to international protection, increase deportation processes, and reinforce bilateral agreements for deportation with countries in the region, as well as for the militarisation of migration routes towards the U.S.¹⁵ Additionally, the new government has consolidated institutional language that criminalises and rejects migration.¹⁶

The new provisions include detention measures, restrictions on access to international protection, and mechanisms of criminalisation and penalisation. Including:¹⁷

- Reactivation of raids and arrests of refugees and migrants in "sensitive locations" —such as schools, universities, hospitals, religious institutions, funeral spaces, and public protests— through the lifting of Directive 10029.2, which has been in effect since 2011;¹⁸
- Reinstatement of the policy to detain irregular migrant families, including children and adolescents;¹⁹
- Temporary use of Guantanamo military facilities for detaining migrants, recorded between February and March 2025;²⁰
- Suspension of the use of the CBP One mobile application, which allowed persons on the move to schedule appointments to apply for asylum and access other regular entry pathways through the southern U.S. border.²¹ This measure has created, in practice, a barrier to exercising the right to apply for asylum;

7 Batalova, J. [Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States](#). Migration Policy Institute, MPI.

8 International Organisation for Migration, IOM (2022a) [World Migration Report Data Snapshot](#).

9 Batalova, J. [Op. Cit.](#) MPI.

10 Ibid.

11 Herrera Lima, F. (2012) *La migración a Estados Unidos: una visión del primer decenio del siglo XXI*. Revista Norteamérica vol.7 no.2.

12 Although limited, these measures include: Temporary Protected Status (TPS), in effect since the 1990s; accelerated naturalisation programmes for non-citizen members of the Armed Forces; Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which protected individuals who arrived in the U.S. as minors from deportation; renewable work permits; the Keeping Families Together Programme, aimed at preventing family separation; Humanitarian Parole; the CBP One app; the establishment of Safe Mobility Offices in four countries in the region, among others. See: Clavijo, A. (2015) *Análisis de la política migratoria de Estados Unidos y su impacto en los países del Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica: una visión securitaria desde el 11 de septiembre de 2001-2010*. Universidad Externado de Colombia. | MMC (n.d.) [Latest Mixed Migration Updates](#) for the Latin America and the Caribbean region. | Hovil, L., Bueno, O. y Hernández Gamboni, A. (2024) *La influencia de las Oficinas de Movilidad Segura en la Migración Mixta de América Latina*. MMC.

13 Baxter, A. and Nowrasteh, A. (2021) [Op. Cit.](#) Cato Institute. | For an analysis of immigration restriction and regularisation measures in recent years, see: MMC (n.d.) [Latest Mixed Migration Updates](#) for the Latin America and the Caribbean region.

14 The White House (n.d.) [Executive Orders](#).

15 MMC (2025a) [Op. Cit.](#) | WOLA (2025) [Trump's Executive Orders and Latin America: Key Things to Know](#).

16 Canal Laiton, X. (2025a) *Redadas por TV, discursos de odio institucional y "bullying" a otros países: la nueva política migratoria de Trump*. 070 Universidad de los Andes.

17 This section only mentions some of the measures related to the changes in the dynamics and impacts on refugees and migrants addressed in the report. For more details and analysis on all the immigration policies introduced or modified by the new administration, see: MMC (2025a) [Op. Cit.](#)

18 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2011) [Enforcement Actions at or Focused on Sensitive Locations. Policy Number 10029.2](#).

19 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2025) [Trump revives practice of detaining migrant families with children](#). CBS NEWS.

20 Debusmann, B. (2025) [Migrants held at Guantanamo transferred to US](#). BBC.

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

- Cancellation of Humanitarian Parole —previously available for persons from certain nationalities, including Venezuelans—, closure of the Refugee Admissions Program and Safe Mobility Offices,²² and attempts to end Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelan²³ and other nationalities;
- Deportation of refugees and migrants, including those with active protection processes under TPS or Humanitarian Parole;²⁴
- Application of the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to deport and imprison more than 200 Venezuelan migrants in El Salvador, some accused without formal evidence of belonging to an organised crime gang, and others criminalised for the “offense” of “illegal migration”;²⁵
- Promotion of “self-deportation” through the creation of the CBP Home mobile application, and the announcement of a financial initiative that would be offered to irregular migrants once they have left the country.²⁶

These measures have been complemented by the deployment of military forces at the U.S.-Mexico border as a deterrent strategy,²⁷ as well as by a cut of nearly USD 600 million previously allocated to humanitarian and development programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean, which included assistance for people in transit to the north.²⁸

2.2. Shifts in migration dynamics in the region

The changes in U.S. migration policy have shifted —at least temporarily— the migration dynamics in the region. First, migration toward the U.S. has decreased significantly, with a marked reduction in arrivals from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as from other continents. Thus, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), registered the irregular entry of 8,347 persons in February 2025, the lowest number since the 1960s.²⁹ It remains uncertain whether this decline will continue, depending on the persistence of the structural drivers of migration in the countries of origin and the continuation of the implemented measures.

Secondly, while northward movements have largely stalled, new migration dynamics have emerged. In response to the increased barriers to entering the U.S., a considerable number of Latin American refugees and migrants who were *en route* through Central America or Mexico have begun return migrations in the north-south direction. On the other hand, some refugees and migrants have been stranded in transit countries.³⁰ The directions that these movements will take are still unclear, although some of these refugees and migrants, fearing return or lacking resources to restart their journey, could attempt to integrate into the country in which they are currently located. This report focuses on analysing the dynamics and conditions of refugees and migrants who are returning or have returned north-south or are stranded along the route.

22 MMC (2025a) [Op. Cit.](#) | Regarding Safe Mobility Offices, see: Hovil, L., Bueno, O. and Hernández Gamboni, A. (2024) [Op. Cit.](#) MMC.

23 Despite this administration’s [attempt](#) to eliminate TPS for Venezuelans, the judicial branch has [protected](#) it. The cancellation, announced in February 2025, did not take effect because on March 31 of that year, federal judge Edward Chen temporarily [blocked](#) the measure and extended TPS protections until October 2026. So far, the U.S. administration has expressed its commitment to complying with the order.

24 American Immigration Council (2025). [The Trump Administration’s Registration Requirement for Immigrants](#).

25 Zuzunaga Ruiz, R. (2025) [¿Qué leyes internacionales estarían violando EE.UU. y El Salvador al recluir a migrantes en la megacárcel de Bukele?](#) El Comercio. | Ferreira Santos, S. (2025) [What is the 1798 law that Trump used to deport migrants?](#) BBC.

26 U.S. Customs and Border Protection (2025) [CBP launches enhanced CBP Home mobile app with new Report Departure feature](#).

27 Buck, B. (2025). [From One Endless War to Another: Trump’s New Military Frontier in Mexico?](#) Cato Institute. | San Juan Flores, P. and Santos Cid, A. (2025) [Así ha repartido Sheinbaum a 10.000 militares en la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos](#). El País.

28 Camhaji, E., San José, E. and San Juan Flores, P. (2025) [Los duros recortes de Trump a la política de cooperación golpean de lleno a decenas de programas clave para México](#). El País.

29 MMC (2025a) [Op. Cit.](#)

30 Díaz, D. (2025) [Stranded: The Trump-induced migration crisis in Mexico](#). The New Humanitarian. | Tico Times (2025). [Stranded and Cashless: US-Deported Migrants Face Uncertain Future in Panama](#).

2.3. Effects on the rights of refugees and migrants

The measures taken by the new U.S. administration have had a direct impact on refugees and migrants in destination countries or in transit. These policies represent a significant setback in international commitments to protect refugees and migrants, and violate fundamental principles of international human rights law, such as the principles of non-refoulement and non-penalisation.³¹

Within the U.S., many refugees and migrants have lost their protection status, been detained, deported, separated from their families, or even imprisoned, in processes marked by irregularities, leading to an increase in detentions and deportations in the country.³² These policies have also generated widespread fear among the settled migrant populations and reduced their access to rights and basic services.³³

At the same time, the provisions have severely affected those in transit toward the U.S. Refugees and migrants on the move through Central America or Mexico—including the nearly 30,000 who had appointments scheduled through CBP One and were waiting in Mexico—have been left without any regular entry options, facing legal limbo and a lack of information about the future of their cases.³⁴ Furthermore, many of those stranded along the route have been placed in a state of uncertainty, exposed to conditions of vulnerability, insecurity and exploitation,³⁵ and, in many cases, living in shelters or makeshift camps.³⁶

Likewise, budget cuts to previously U.S.-funded assistance programmes have affected the most vulnerable refugees and migrants in the region, by limiting the capacity of humanitarian organisations and government institutions to provide assistance. In transit countries, from Mexico to Colombia, this has resulted in the closure of shelters and other spaces for support and guidance, increasing people's exposure to risks, abuse, and human rights violations, and making it even harder for them to access essential services along the route.³⁷

31 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (n.d.) [Refugee rights – Frequently asked questions](#). | Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR (n.d.) [International Human Rights Law](#).

32 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) reports that it has exhausted all available detention space, with 46,700 people in custody, representing 113% of its capacity. See: MMC (2025a) [Op. Cit.](#)

33 Primera, M. (2025) [El miedo a ir al médico se extiende entre los migrantes de Texas](#). El País. | Colomé, C. (2025) [Miles de niños temen ir a la escuela por las deportaciones: “Si un día no llego al bus a recogerte, no lloras”](#). El País.

34 Graham, T. (2025). [US asylum seekers in despair after Trump cancels CBP One app](#). The Guardian.

35 Díaz, D. (2025) [Op. Cit.](#) The New Humanitarian. | Médicos Sin Fronteras (2025) [México: aumentan los riesgos para los migrantes tras el cierre del procedimiento de asilo en EE.UU.](#)

36 Excelsior (2025). [Migrantes despiertan del sueño americano: la vida sobre las vías](#)

37 Human Rights Watch (2025). [Ten Harmful Trump Administration Immigration and Refugee Policies](#). | Negrete, E. (2025) [El recorte a USAID sacude Latinoamérica y deja importantes programas sociales en el limbo](#). Swissinfo.

3. Return dynamics towards South America

This section presents findings on north–south return migration dynamics based on data collected by 4Mi from refugees and migrants who had initiated migration towards the U.S. and, at the time of the survey, had either returned or were in the process of returning to countries in Latin America.

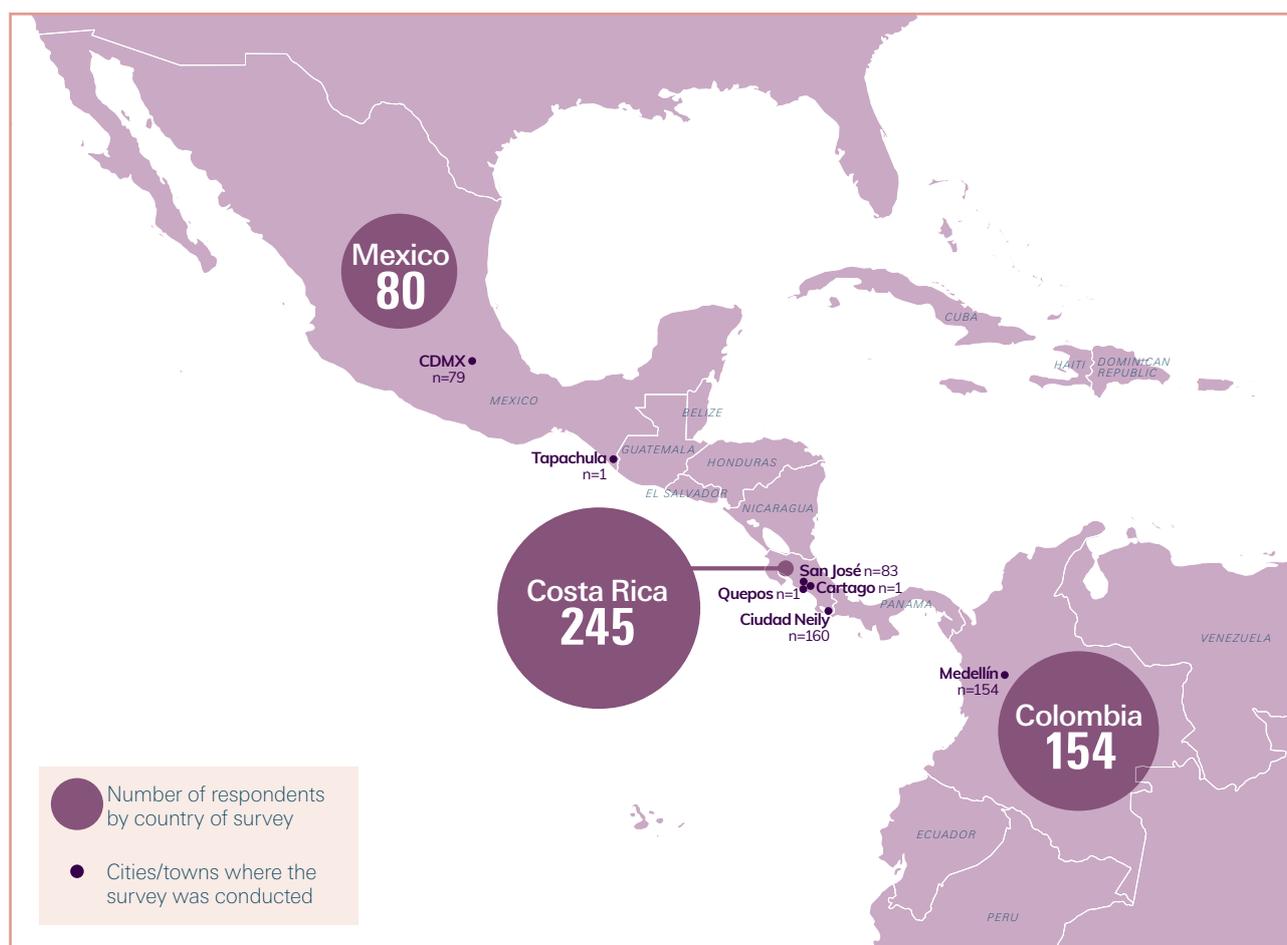
3.1. Methodology: the 4Mi initiative

This section on return dynamics towards Latin America is based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected by MMC through the 4Mi project in Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and Mexico during March 2025.

3.1.1. Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data was collected in person and by phone through 4Mi Return surveys—designed specifically for this study—applied to 479 refugees and migrants who had previously migrated to Central and North America and, at the time of the survey, were returning in a north-south direction. The surveys were conducted between March 5th and 31st, 2025, in Costa Rica (245), Colombia (154) and Mexico (80) (see Map 1 for the cities where the surveys were conducted).³⁸

Map 1. Location of the 4Mi Return surveys



38 MMC conducted 476 interviews in person and 3 by telephone with refugees and migrants in Tapachula (Mexico), Cartago, and Quepos (Costa Rica).

Profiles of respondents³⁹

The survey sample was divided into 271 men (57%) and 206 women (43%). One non-binary person and one person who preferred not to discuss their gender identity also participated.

Most respondents were young adults between 18 and 35 (75%). Almost a fifth (18%) were between the ages of 36 and 45, 6% were over the age of 46, and the remaining 1% were five adolescents between the ages of 16 and 17, three of whom were unaccompanied minors.

Regarding nationality, except for one Nepalese person, the entire sample (479) was from Latin America and the Caribbean, primarily from Venezuela (63%), Colombia (17%), and Ecuador (11%).⁴⁰

Within the sample, 94% of people were on the move, completing their return journey, and 6% had completed their return journey and were in their destination country.

Limitations

- The 4Mi Return survey uses purposive sampling, meaning that respondents were refugees and migrants who agreed to participate in the research at key points along the north-south migration routes in the Americas. Therefore, the survey results are illustrative and cannot be considered statistically representative of return migration dynamics as a whole.
- The location of the 4Mi data collection points in Colombia and Mexico could have limited the capture of information on certain return routes or dynamics, which may have resulted in gaps or underreporting in the collected data.

3.1.2. Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with five key informants from non-governmental organisations working in research, advocacy, or providing direct assistance to refugees and migrants in Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia.⁴¹

3.2. 4Mi findings

3.2.1. Profiles of refugees and migrants having returned or returning

Among the respondents returning or in the process of returning to Latin America from North America (n=479), the majority were young Latin American adults: all but one were nationals of the region, and 76% were under the age of 35. Respondents were predominantly from northern South America: Venezuelans (63%), Colombians (17%), Ecuadorians (11%), and Peruvians (3%). Additionally, 6% of respondents were from other countries, including Cuba (7), Brazil (6), Bolivia (5), Chile (2), Panama (2), Guatemala (2), El Salvador (1), Haiti (1), and Paraguay (1).

The survey data are consistent with information provided by key informants who noted that—in those return movements from Central or North America—there is a slightly higher proportion of men than women on the route, that most are young adults, and that the movements are almost exclusively made up of nationals of the region.

In Central America, media reports suggest that, alongside the return of refugees and migrants from South America, high numbers of Central Americans are also undertaking return journeys to their countries of origin.⁴²

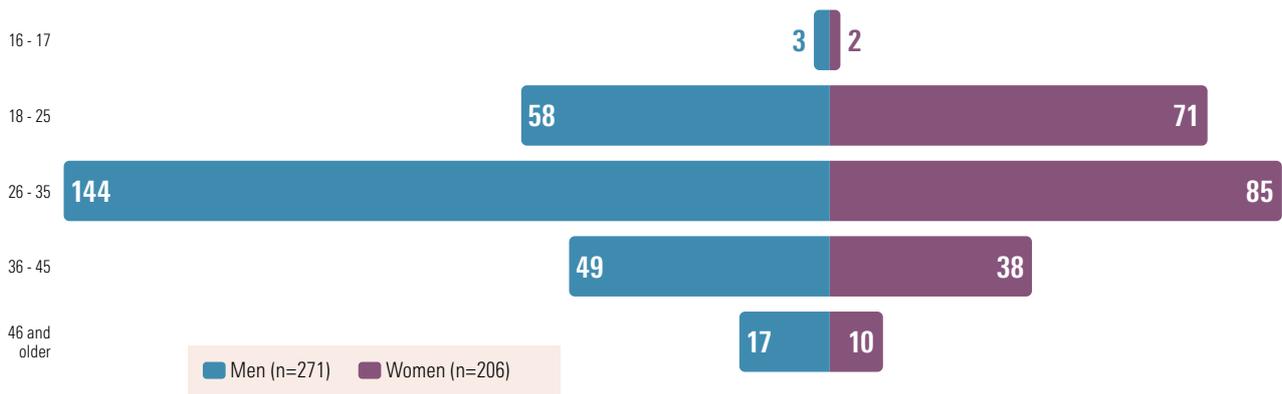
39 The 4Mi Returns survey captures refugees and migrants on all three types of return (self-initiated, AVR and deportation). While the 4Mi survey also captured people who had been deported, these responses were excluded from this study due to the very small sample size. No respondent reported having received AVR. Therefore, the sample used for this analysis only includes refugees and migrants on self-initiated returns.

40 The total sample included 15 respondents from Peru, 7 from Brazil, 7 from Cuba, 5 from Bolivia, 2 from Panama, 2 from Chile, 2 from Guatemala, 2 from Haiti, 1 from El Salvador, and 1 from Paraguay.

41 In alphabetical order, we thank the following organisations for their time and input: [Acción Contra el Hambre](#) – Colombia (in-person interview), [Fe y Alegría](#) Panamá (virtual interview), [Médicos del Mundo Colombia](#) (in-person) and two other organisations whose names will remain confidential.

42 González, A. and Amaya, S. (2025) [La migración inversa no es un fenómeno nuevo, pero las medidas para acelerarla ponen en mayor riesgo a las personas](#). BBC.

Figure 1. Number of respondents having returned or returning on their own, by age and gender groups, n=477⁴³



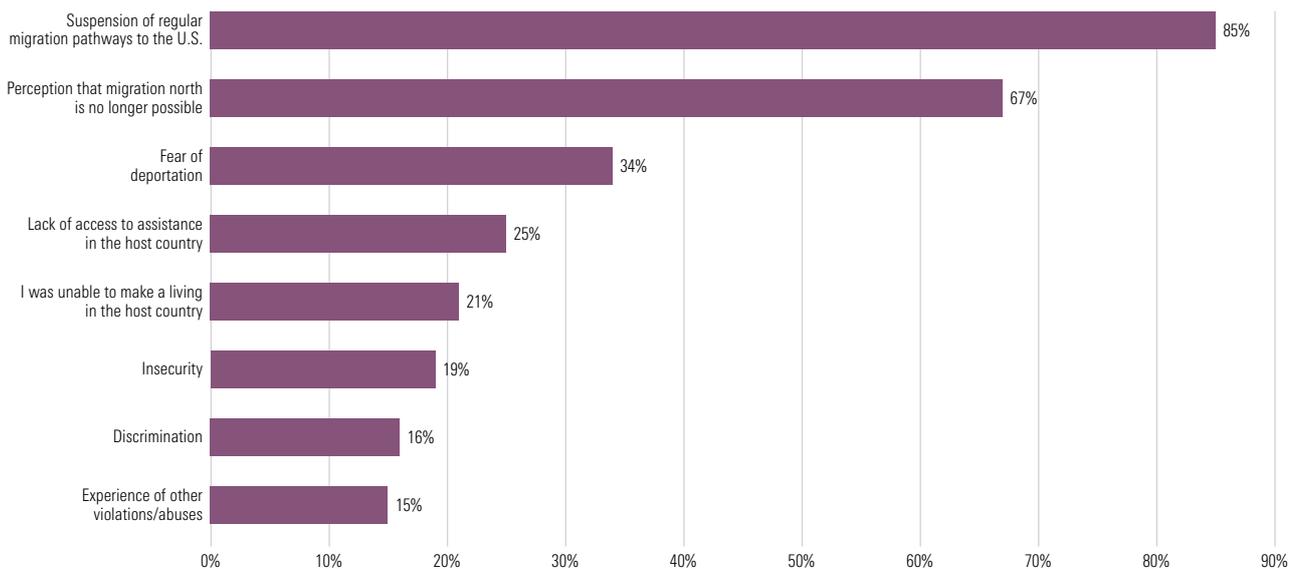
Key informants stated that the composition of the travel groups returning south is similar to those heading north in previous months, meaning an important proportion of adults and a notable presence of family units, including children and adolescents. In line with this, a quarter of the respondents were travelling alone (26%), with this situation being more common among men (n=271) than among women (n=206), at 37% and 12% respectively. Thirty-nine per cent were travelling with other adults—mainly partners, family members or acquaintances during the journey—while a third (35%) were travelling with their children. This latter case was more frequent among women (47%) than men (26%).

3.2.2. Reasons for self-initiated return

Most respondents (85%, see Figure 2) indicated that their return journey was due to the suspension of migration mechanisms to the U.S. In line with the interviews and secondary sources,⁴⁴ these returns include those who were waiting for an appointment through CBP One or planned to request one upon arriving in Mexico, as well as those who intended to cross the border irregularly to request asylum, were awaiting the outcome of their refugee resettlement process, or were planning to access family reunification processes, Humanitarian Parole, among others.

Figure 2. Reasons why refugees and migrants returned or were returning

Answers to the 4Mi question “For what reasons are you returning/did you return?” n=479; Multiple choice (only the eight most frequently mentioned options are shown)



⁴³ Additionally, a 21-year-old non-binary person and a 26-year-old person who preferred not to discuss their gender identity were also surveyed, but were not included in the graph.

⁴⁴ Barragán, A. (2025) [Los migrantes en la frontera se debaten entre regresar a su país o quedarse en México: “Aquí tienes más oportunidades”](#). El País. | Guillén, B. and Barragán, A. (2025) [Los rostros de los que se quedaron a las puertas de pedir asilo](#). El País. | HIAS (2025) [Los derechos de los refugiados y la Administración Trump: Primera semana](#).

Two-thirds of respondents (67%) indicated that they returned because they perceived that migration to the north was no longer possible, and a third (34%) mentioned the fear of being deported at the end of their migration process. This illustrates the impact of the U.S. migration policies, discouraging people from migrating to the country, at least temporarily.

Failing to settle in a host country in Central and North America was another reason respondents were returning. A quarter of respondents (25%) mentioned a lack of assistance in the receiving country. This situation could have been created or exacerbated by cuts in US cooperation budgets for programmes implemented by organisations and government entities in the region,⁴⁵ which have been essential for assistance to refugees and migrants.⁴⁶ A fifth (21%) indicated an inability to generate sufficient income to support themselves in the host country as a reason for returning, which could be linked to difficulties in regularisation and integration.⁴⁷ Most respondents who chose these two options had initiated their return from Mexico and Panama.⁴⁸

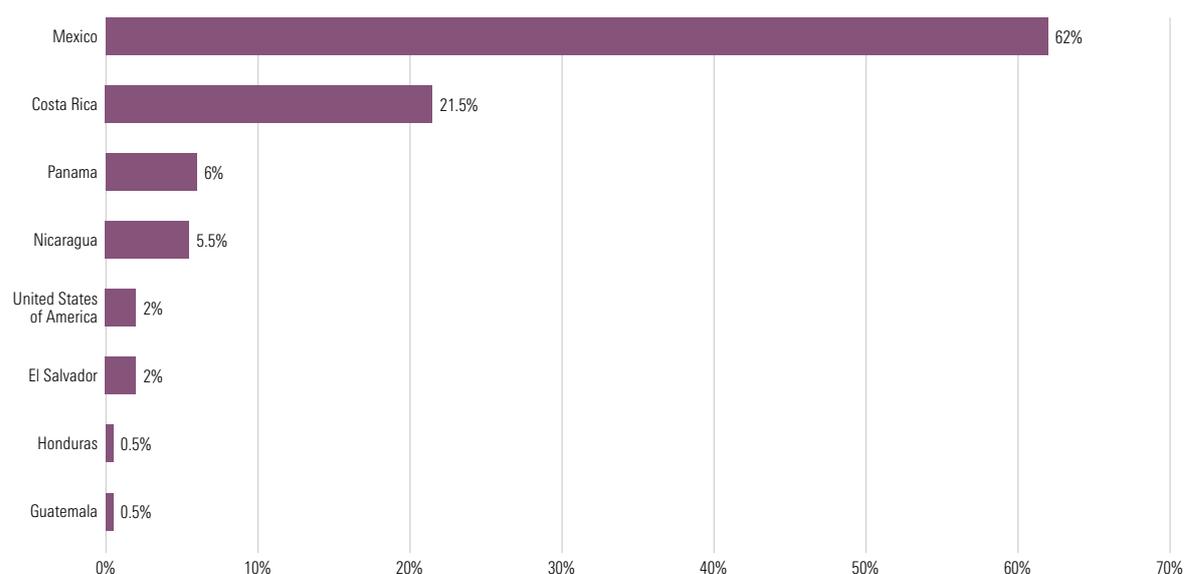
Respondents also mentioned reasons related to their experiences in transit or destination countries within the region. This includes insecurity (reported by 19% of respondents), discrimination (16%), and having experienced abuse or violence (15%) (see section ProLAC “4.2.1. Protection risks”). Previous studies have documented the heightened risks that refugees and migrants face in their journey through Central America and Mexico, including violence, theft, extortion, and discrimination.⁴⁹

3.2.3. Countries of departure for return migration

The survey results and information provided by key informants indicate that the main point of departure for these return movements is Mexico, where many refugees and migrants attempting to reach the U.S. had just arrived or were waiting to cross the border. Within the 4Mi sample, 62% of respondents began their journey in Mexico (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Country of departure for the return

Answers to the 4Mi question “From which country did you start your return?”, n= 479



Costa Rica (21.5%) and Panama (6%) were the second and third most mentioned countries as starting points for return. In both countries, enumerators reported cases where law enforcement or immigration agents physically prevented people in transit from continuing their journey north and redirected them to leave these countries towards the south.

45 Camhaji, E., San José, E. and San Juan Flores, P. (2025) [Los duros recortes de Trump a la política de cooperación golpean de lleno a decenas de programas clave para México](#). El País. | Ojeda, A. (2025) [¿Cómo puede afectar el recorte de USAID a América Latina?](#) Diálogo Político.

46 According to 4Mi surveys conducted in the second half of 2024 in Costa Rica and Mexico with 571 people travelling to the U.S., 87% reported having received assistance on their migration route. Among them (n=496), a significant portion mentioned that the help came from Non-Governmental Organisations (49%), United Nations agencies (38%), and government entities (25%). See more data at: [4Mi Interactive Dashboard for Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

47 ProLAC (2025) [Regional Protection Monitoring in Latin America](#). | Acción Contra el Hambre (2024) [Cada día, los migrantes enfrentan graves riesgos en su ruta por Centroamérica. Estas son sus historias](#). | Chavez-González, D. and Delgado, N. (2023) [A winding path to integration. Venezuelan migrants' regularization and labor market prospects](#). IOM and MPI.

48 118 respondents stated they were returning due to “Lack of access to assistance in the host country”, of which, 81 had started their return journey in Mexico (69%) and 17 in Panama (14%). On the other hand, 100 persons indicated they were returning because they “Could not make a living in the host country”, with 78 having started their journey in Mexico and 11 in Panama.

49 ProLAC (2025) [Op. Cit.](#) | Acción Contra el Hambre (2024) [Op. Cit.](#)

A further 8.5% of respondents started their return journey in another Central American country (see Figure 3). According to the observations of the 4Mi survey team, many people who were in transit to the north decided to return before reaching Mexico, as they perceived the growing difficulties in entering the U.S. Only 2% started their return from the U.S.

Most respondents spent a short time in the country where they began their return: 51% stayed between 1 and 6 months, and 23% for less than a month. This, along with the reasons for return (see Figure 2), suggests that these refugees and migrants were travelling north but could not complete their journey before the new U.S. policies were introduced.

However, a quarter of respondents (25%) had been in those countries for 6 months to two years.⁵⁰ Among these (n=122), most were in Mexico (66%) and Panama (12%), although cases of this length of stay were also identified in the U.S. (8), Costa Rica (7), El Salvador (4), Nicaragua (3), Honduras (3) and Guatemala (1). These more extended stays may reflect attempts to settle or prolonged transit, with persons “stranded” while waiting to raise money to continue the journey—a common situation in migration dynamics in the Americas⁵¹—or waiting for their CBP One appointment in Mexico, where wait times could exceed 6 months.⁵²

Almost all respondents (97%) had irregular migration status in the country where the survey was conducted, which is in line with the majority of respondents being in transit.

3.2.4. Main routes and dynamics of return

According to the information from the 4Mi surveys and interviews with key informants, people are returning via the same migration routes previously used for migration to the north (see Map 2). However, an increase in air and maritime routes has been recorded, as detailed further below.

Map 2. Main north-south land return migration routes across the Americas



50 Only three respondents, likely individuals who had settled in those countries, had been in the country from which they started their return for between 2 and 5 years (the U.S., Canada and Mexico).

51 Celis Bernier, L. and Ávila Argumedo, J. (2024) *Varados en Urabá: el otro drama de los migrantes que quieren cruzar el Darién*. Editorial Board. | Infobae (2021) *Migrantes en México: Cansados y sin dinero, cientos regresan al sur del país*.

52 Ávila, J. (2024) *¿Cómo funciona CBP One? La aplicación con la que más de 800.000 inmigrantes han ingresado legalmente a Estados Unidos*. El País.

Although the available information is limited and dynamic, refugees and migrants have told the organisations interviewed and the 4Mi enumerators that they are returning to South America using public buses paid for with their own resources, walking, or hitchhiking. Additionally, these organisations and the 4Mi enumerators have noticed that returns occur in slightly smaller travel groups compared to south-north migration. The average group size among respondents who were travelling with others (n=354) was three people. In contrast, according to available information, on the northbound route—although group size varied greatly—large groups of between 7 and 15 people were observed. This may be due to the fact that, for the moment, the number of refugees and migrants travelling north-south is lower than those recorded in the south-north direction, and people are seeking to go unnoticed. In line with this, it has been observed that some refugees and migrants choose to travel through less-patrolled trails, due to the fear of being detained.

3.2.4.1. Beginning of the journey

Air travel from Mexico and Central America to South America

According to some official sources, refugees and migrants with the valid documentation choose to return by plane to countries in South America.⁵³ At the regional level, these movements remain poorly documented. Among the 80 respondents surveyed in Mexico, more than half (48) expressed the intention to reach South America by air, using their own resources. The majority of these respondents were of Venezuelan (18) and Colombian (14) nationality. However, respondents from other South American countries planning to fly to their country of nationality were also identified.⁵⁴

In Costa Rica, a smaller proportion (15%) of the 234 respondents returning to South American countries indicated that they were considering travelling by air. Of that group (n=34), all but one were of Venezuelan nationality.

Among the returnees surveyed in Mexico and Costa Rica, there was therefore a significant presence of Venezuelan nationals who were considering air travel as their means of reaching South America. The intention of Venezuelan respondents to return by plane aligns with numbers from Migración Colombia, which show a noticeable increase in arrivals of Venezuelans by air when comparing January and February 2024 with the same period in 2025: arrivals of Venezuelans from Mexico increased from 1,177 to 3,197 (+172%), from Costa Rica from 229 to 405 (+77%), and from the U.S. from 7,535 in 2024 to 17,701 in 2025 (+57%).⁵⁵

Meanwhile, among the 80 respondents surveyed in Mexico, nearly a quarter (18) planned to seek return via Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR). However, among all respondents, none reported having travelled with AVR. This may be due to difficulties in accessing these mechanisms, given the limited capacity of governments and organisations to fund these programmes.

Refugees and migrants who lack the necessary documentation to travel by air and who have been unable to access AVR programmes are forced to return by land and sea to the south of the region on their own, as discussed further down below.

Travel from Mexico and Central America to Panama

Despite the militarisation of Mexico's southern border and the northern and southern borders of Guatemala,⁵⁶ at the time of writing, no refugees and migrants were reported to have faced related obstacles migrating to Guatemala or Honduras.

For transit from Costa Rica southwards, official information about measures taken by the different governments is scarce. In February 2025, the governments of Costa Rica and Panama stated that they had agreed on a joint work protocol to "optimise the reverse return flow from north to south".⁵⁷ However, this protocol was not published, and there is no clarity on which refugees and migrants it targets or what specific measures it includes.

53 Voz de América (2025a) [Aumenta migración de retorno de venezolanos en Colombia, que pide requisitos para su entrada](#).

54 In most Latin American countries, the right of nationals to enter their own country is protected by the Constitution and the national migration regulations of various States, as well as by international human rights treaties. This right is independent of the manner in which they left the country, even if it was irregularly, so many people can take flights to their countries of origin with only their national identity documents, including those without valid passports. This principle is supported by international instruments such as the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which recognises the right of everyone to enter their own country.

55 Migración Colombia (2025). [Monitoreo de dinámicas migratorias. Informe sobre flujos migratorios inversos: retos y acciones frente a una nueva dinámica migratoria](#).

56 WOLA (2025) [Los soldados no son policía fronteriza: los peligros de usar militares contra las personas migrantes](#). | San Juan Flores, P. and Santos Cid, A. (2025) [Así ha repartido Sheinbaum a 10.000 militares en la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos](#). El País. | Pérez, S. (2025) [Guatemala refuerza sus fronteras con militares para frenar tráfico ilícito y migración irregular](#). AP News.

57 Ministry of Public Security. National Government of Panama (2025) [Autoridades de Panamá y Costa Rica establecen protocolos para el flujo migratorio inverso](#).

Press reports in February indicated that, as a result of this agreement, the authorities of both countries were facilitating movement southward by buses paid for by the refugees and migrants themselves.⁵⁸ According to the published information, these transfers concluded in Colón or Puerto Obaldia, on the Caribbean coast of Panama, where refugees and migrants boarded maritime transport operated by private companies, heading to Colombia.

However, this information was not confirmed by any of the organisations interviewed, who expressed concern about the lack of public and accessible information from both governments regarding measures to manage north-south migration—whether through a binational coordination protocol or unilateral actions by each state. One of these organisations indicated that the Panamanian government may have indeed facilitated these transfers to the country’s coasts to help people leave for Colombia, but that this practice seems to have stopped following a shipwreck that occurred on 22 February⁵⁹ due to the risks that these journeys imply.

The available information indicates that two of the three spaces originally set up by the Panamanian government to provide assistance for refugees and migrants travelling north—the Temporary Migrant Reception Stations (ETRM in Spanish)—are currently not operating.⁶⁰ The situation is similar in Costa Rica. Initially, the Temporary Care Centre for Refugees, Migrants and Asylum Seekers (CATEM in Spanish)—also initially created to assist migrants travelling north— could be used by refugees and migrants migrating by their own means towards South America.⁶¹

The Ombudsperson’s Office of Costa Rica warned that, for refugees and migrants returning on their own, the conditions of assistance and reception at the CATEM—including sleeping arrangements and the amount of food provided—were inadequate and considerably inferior to those offered to deported refugees and migrants.⁶² However, since the end of February, this space has been exclusively reserved for refugees and migrants deported from the U.S. and is inaccessible to refugees and migrants on self-initiated returns.⁶³

58 Swissinfo.ch (2025) [Panamá y Costa Rica acuerdan medidas para el traslado de migrantes que regresan al sur](#). | Voz de América (2025b) [Panamá busca regularizar flujo migratorio de retorno por mar para evitar a redes criminales](#).

59 El Colombiano (2025) [Naufragio de migrantes en Panamá: murió niña venezolana de ocho años y rescataron con vida a 20 personas más](#).

60 MMC (2025a) [Op. Cit](#)

61 Ministry of Public Security. National Government of Panama (2025) [Op. Cit](#).

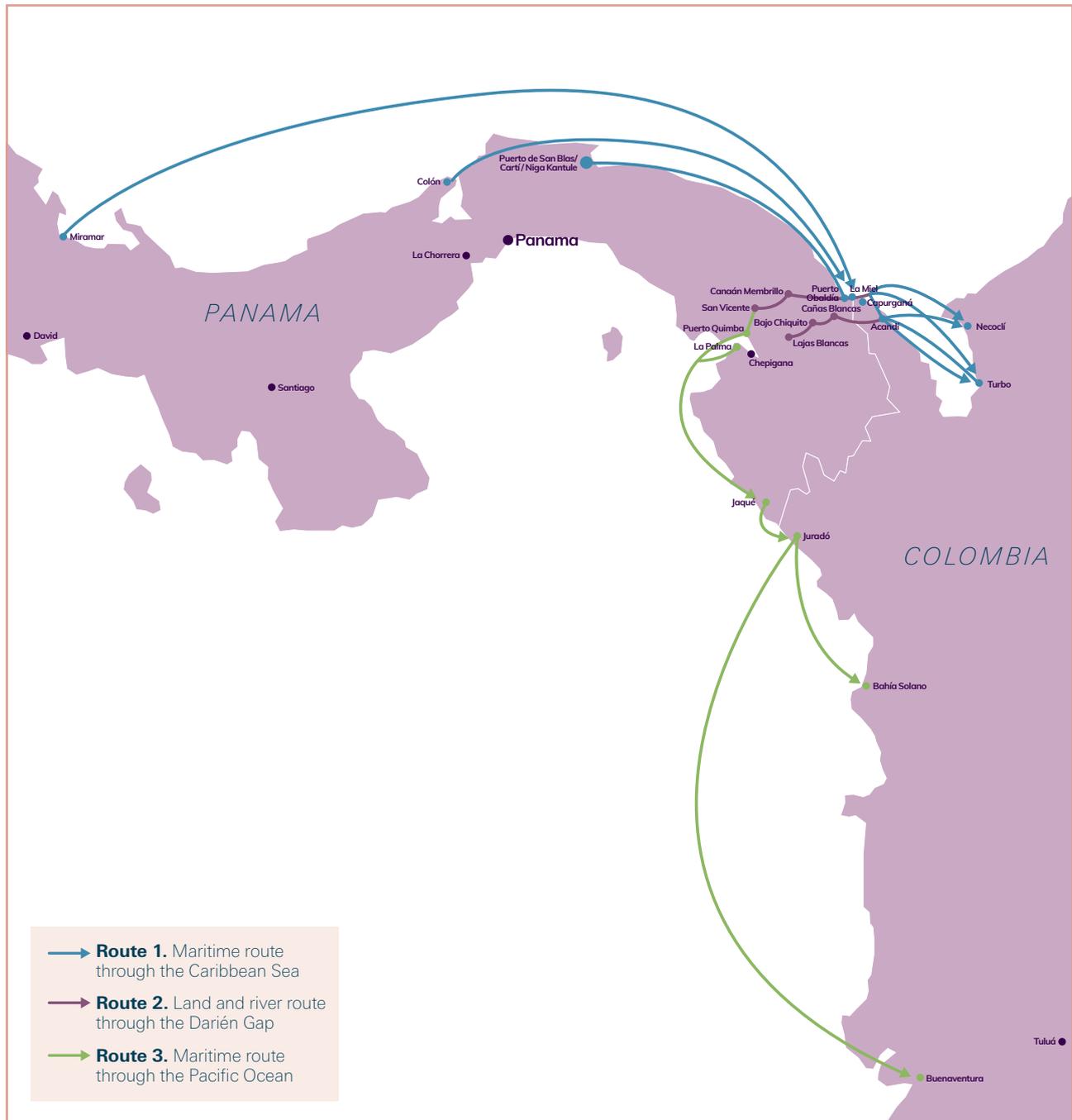
62 Vargas, A. (2025) [Defensoría denuncia restricciones y malas condiciones para migrantes en el CATEM](#). CR Hoy.

63 Núñez Chacón, M. (2025) [Costa Rica crea categorías de migrantes: recibe los enviados por EE. UU. mientras echa del CateM a quienes llegan por su cuenta](#). Seminario Universidad.

3.2.4.2. Crossings from Panama to Colombia

Once in Panama, refugees and migrants can reach Colombia through maritime routes via the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, or by the land route crossing the Darién Gap (see Map 3).

Map 3. Irregular entry routes from Panama to Colombia



Source: Created by the authors based on interviews and secondary sources referenced in the footnote.⁶⁴

64 Acción Contra el Hambre (2025) *Información para la acción: análisis humanitario y nuestra acción dinámica migratoria en la región del Darién flujo inverso norte-sur región del Darién – Acandí*. | Vanegas, S. (2025) *“Es mucho peor que cruzar el Darién”: las peligrosas rutas marítimas desde Panamá a Colombia que usan los refugiados y migrantes venezolanos que regresan a su país*. BBC. | García, S. and Shuldiner, H. (2025) *La desaceleración del flujo de refugiados y migrantes en Colombia aprieta ganancias del tráfico de personas*. InSight Crime. | Chocó 7 días (2025) *Alto número de migrantes está llegando a Bahía Solano*.

Route 1. The Caribbean Sea

According to secondary sources and key informants interviewed, most refugees and migrants are entering Colombia from Panama through the Caribbean Sea.⁶⁵ Among the 154 respondents surveyed in Colombia by 4Mi, 73% used this route.

Based on the information shared by key informants and secondary sources, refugees and migrants returning south typically set off from ports in Miramar, San Blas/Cartí or Colón in Panama, from where they take boats to Puerto Obaldía or La Miel, two coastal locations in Panama, very close to the border with Colombia. From there, they continue by small boats to Colombian towns, such as Capurganá or the municipal capital of Acandí (Chocó), to cross the Gulf of Urabá towards Necoclí or Turbo (Antioquia). In some cases, they also travel directly from Panamanian coastal points to these municipalities in Antioquia (see Map 3). Survey respondents reported that these Panama-Colombia transfers cost between USD 140 and USD 300 per person, depending on the route and the financial conditions of the refugees and migrants in transit.

The boats used for these journeys—both from Panama and to cross the Gulf of Urabá in Colombia—are typically small boats unsuitable for the open sea. This precariousness has led to at least one shipwreck⁶⁶ and multiple incidents involving broken-down boats, where refugees and migrants had to wait for several hours until another boat arrived to rescue them and take them to the mainland.⁶⁷ Key informants pointed out that maritime journeys within Colombia are being operated by the same companies that previously provided services in the Gulf of Urabá in the south-north direction,⁶⁸ while independent actors are also operating in both countries, complicating the tracking and official registration of transit. Although official information from Migración Colombia indicates that it has offices in both Turbo and Capurganá to monitor the area,⁶⁹ according to organisations operating in the Darién who were interviewed, the agency only maintains consistent oversight at the entry point in Capurganá.

However, information about the people or structures facilitating these maritime journeys is lacking. Several survey respondents reported having obtained the contacts for these trips through smugglers⁷⁰ with whom they had interacted previously during their journey to Panama through the Darién Gap.

Route 2. The Darién Gap

Some refugees and migrants entering Colombia from Panama are travelling on foot and using boats along the overland and river routes through the Darién Gap (see Map 3). Among those surveyed in Colombia (n=154), 22% reported having arrived in the country via this route. According to key informants, these movements were more common in late January and early February, as Panamanian security forces later intensified controls on people attempting to enter the jungle on foot. These organisations also noted that many refugees and migrants try to avoid this route and prefer maritime or air travel, as the experience of crossing the Darién from south to north was highly traumatic⁷¹ and they do not wish to relive it. Nevertheless, some refugees and migrants may have taken this route due to insufficient financial resources to afford maritime transport.

According to key informants and survey respondents, transit through the Darién appears to occur along the two most-used routes in the south-north direction. One starts in San Vicente and continues to Canaán Membrillo, passing through El Abuelo, Dos Bocas and Espové, until reaching Capurganá. The other part starts from Lajas Blancas and crosses Bajo Chiquito, Comegallina, Cañas Blancas and Tres Bocas, until reaching Acandí (see Map 3).⁷²

Route 3. The Pacific Ocean

Some refugees and migrants returning have entered Colombia through the maritime route of the Pacific Ocean. This route requires special attention due to the risks it implies. The route begins in San Vicente, from where refugees and migrants travel to the ports of Puerto Quimba and La Palma, and then continue by sea to Jaqué (Panama). From there, they enter Colombia through Juradó to travel by sea to Bahía Solano or Buenaventura, the latter being the main port on Colombia's Pacific coast (see Map 3).

65 Acción Contra el Hambre (2025) *Op. Cit.* | Vanegas, S. (2025) *Op. Cit.* BBC.

66 El Colombiano (2025) *Op. Cit.*

67 Vanegas, S. (2025) *Op. Cit.* BBC.

68 Álvarez de las Salas, D. (2023) *Así es el cruel tráfico de las mafias con migrantes venezolanos en el Tapón del Darién*. El Tiempo.

69 Migración Colombia (n.d.) *Regional Antioquia*.

70 MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities—paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants—that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants' definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences. See: MMC (2024) *MMC's understanding and use of the terms Mixed migration and Human smuggling*.

71 For more information on situations experienced and risks in the Darién Gap, see: MMC (2025b) *Security risks in the Darién Gap and assistance needed among migrants*. | Médicos Sin Fronteras (2024) *Darién: aumento de la brutalidad contra migrantes*.

72 Human Rights Watch (2024) *Abandonados en la selva. Protección y asistencia para refugiados y refugiados y migrantes y solicitantes de asilo en el Tapón del Darién*.

Although only 5% of respondents surveyed by 4Mi in Colombia reported using this route, its use may be underreported due to the location of the 4Mi enumerators (Medellín) and it could represent a larger proportion of return movements. Indeed, 20% of the 234 respondents returning to countries in South America who were surveyed in Costa Rica stated that they planned to migrate via the Pacific route.

The use of this route raises particular concerns due to the well-established presence of armed groups and organised crime linked to drug trafficking in the Colombian Pacific region, which exposes refugees and migrants to a high risk of violence, extortion, or abuse.⁷³ Much of this movement remains invisible once refugees and migrants disembark on Colombia's Pacific coast, as there are no systematic monitoring mechanisms by authorities or humanitarian actors at these ports.

3.2.4.3. Entries into Colombia from the Panama Border: Official Statistics to Date

According to data from Migración Colombia, 7,592 foreigners entered Colombia irregularly from Panama between January and April 2025.⁷⁴ These figures are based on records from Capurganá, either upon the arrival of maritime vessels or at the end of one of the land routes. Key informants noted that the Colombian government requires transport companies to disembark exclusively in this town. However, according to a key informant with presence in the Darién Gap, some boats operated by smugglers may be entering from Panama and dropping off refugees and migrants directly in the municipal capitals of Acandí, Necoclí or Turbo (see Map 3) to avoid migration controls, which could result in significant underreporting in the official statistics.

Attempts by refugees and migrants to evade official registration may be motivated by Colombia's current policy, which grants Venezuelans who have left Colombia irregularly and re-enter a Permit for Entry and Stay (PIP) that authorises transit through Colombia for only a non-renewable period of 15 days. After this period, they must undergo exit control towards Venezuela or a third country—even if they were holders of the Temporary Protection Permit (PPT)— (see ProLAC section "4.2.3. Risks and conditions of return to countries in the region").⁷⁵

3.2.4.4. The role of migrant smugglers

Almost half of respondents (46%) reported having used or intending to use the services of a smuggler to carry out their return journey. This proportion is higher than that reported by respondents surveyed in transit to North America (39%)⁷⁶ and in movements through South America (20%),⁷⁷ according to previous MMC research. Furthermore, an additional 12% indicated that they were unsure whether they needed to hire a smuggler.

The use of smugglers may be linked to the lack of clearly mapped routes along the entire north-south trajectory, as return migration dynamics are just beginning to consolidate. Additionally, most refugees and migrants planning to return to South America would do so via maritime routes from Panama to Colombia (see Map 3), where regular entry is restricted by Colombian authorities to those with valid documentation, resulting in transit being heavily controlled by smugglers who facilitate irregular crossings.

The organisations interviewed noted that, as the volume of people migrating southward has increased, so too has the presence and visibility of smugglers offering services to facilitate these irregular movements from Mexico and Central America to the south. This increase has been particularly identified at transit points in Costa Rica (with fees ranging from USD 700 to USD 1,000), Panama and border areas entering Colombia.

73 Mangrané Cuevas, L. and Valencia Molina, B. (2024) *El Pacífico colombiano entre el sueño de la Paz Total, el abandono estatal y la guerra*. El Salto Diario.

74 Migración Colombia (2025b) *Migrantes en tránsito irregular. Panorama en Colombia 2012 - 2025 [Corte: 20 de abril de 2025]*.

75 Migración Colombia (2025a). *Op. Cit.*

76 Canal Laiton, X. (2024) *Secondary Actors: the role of smugglers in mixed migration through the Americas*. MMC.

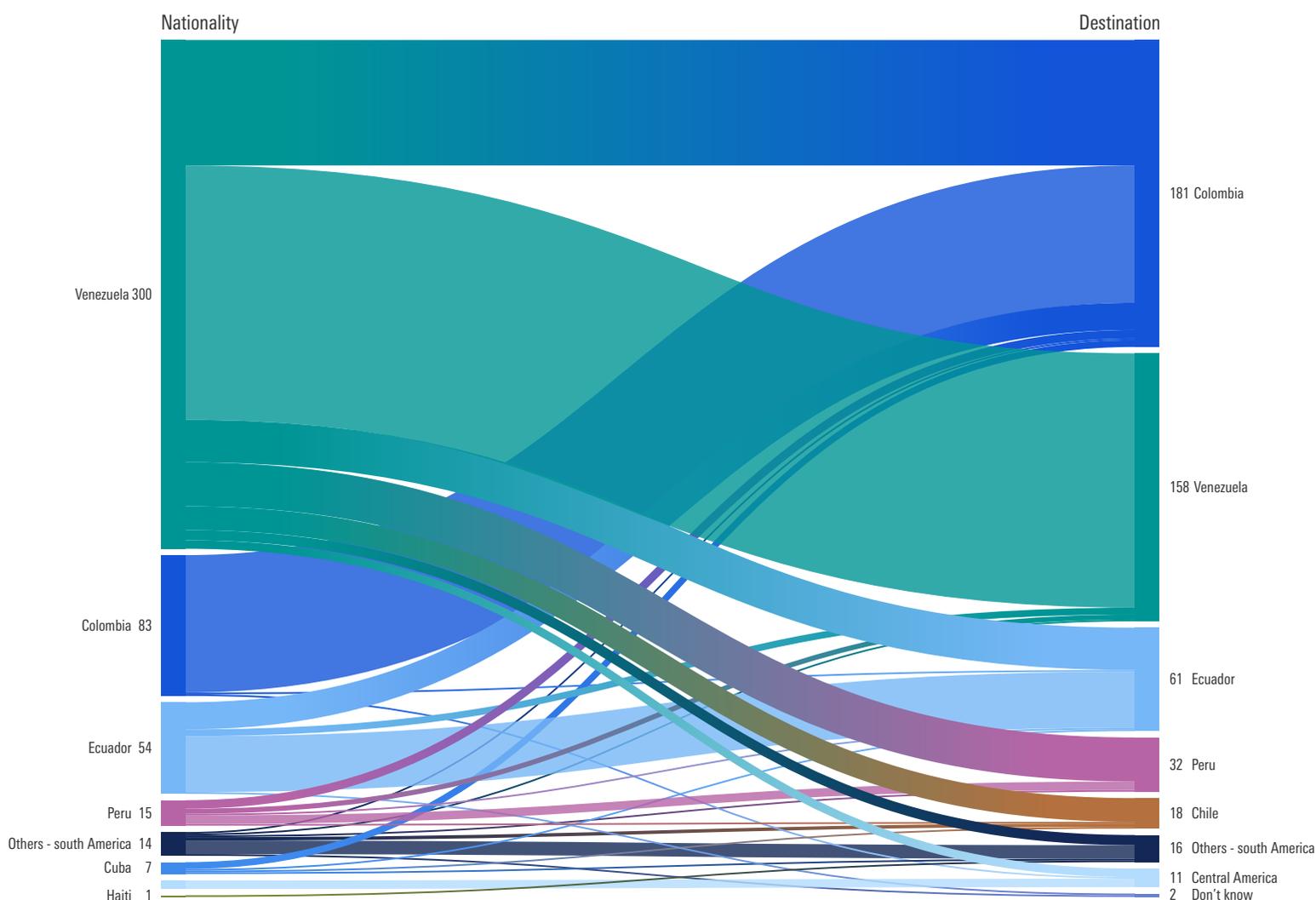
77 Canal Laiton, X. (2025b) *Smuggling and migration in South America. Insights from migrants*. MMC.

3.2.5. Destination countries

Refugees and migrants on the move in the north-south direction through the Americas are headed, for the most part, to South American destinations. While about two-thirds of respondents stated that they were returning to their country of nationality (59%), a considerable share (41%) indicated that they planned to settle in a different country. This latter group (n=197) primarily comprises Venezuelans (76%), who, despite returning to South America, do not necessarily have Venezuela as their final destination (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Destination country of return migration, by nationality of respondents

Answers to 4Mi questions: “What is your country of nationality?” and “What is your country of destination?”, n=479



3.2.5.1. Destinations of Venezuelan respondents

Among the Venezuelan respondents (n=300), half (50%) stated that their destination was Venezuela. The other half (n=150) indicated that they were heading to another country, with the main destinations being Colombia (49%), Peru (17%), Ecuador (17%) and Chile (9%). The remaining 8% had Costa Rica, Argentina or Brazil as their destination. The high percentage of Venezuelan nationals heading to other countries in the region raises concerns due to the growing difficulties related to entry and integration in several South American countries.⁷⁸

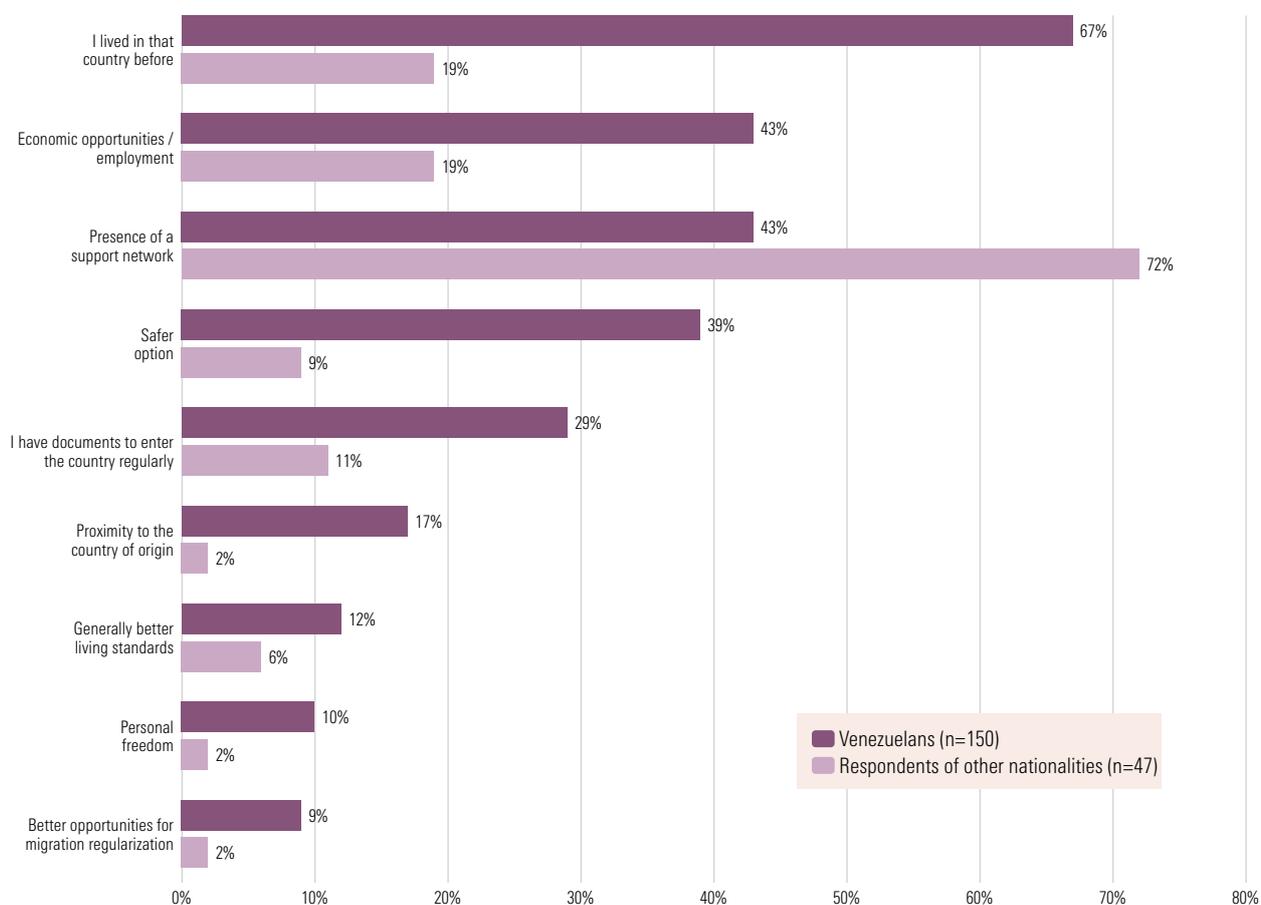
78 MMC (2024b) [Migration drivers and onward movement among migrants in South America](#) | MMC (2024c) [Risks, dangers and assistance needs among migrants in South America](#). | Canal Laiton, X. (2025) [Op. Cit.](#). MMC.

Among the Venezuelan respondents who indicated a destination other than Venezuela (n=150), 67% stated that they had chosen that country because they had previously lived there. This highlights a pattern of onward migration, documented in previous research, where Venezuelan refugees and migrants who had settled in a host country embark on a new journey.⁷⁹

Other factors that influenced Venezuelan respondents' choice to return to a country other than Venezuela included the existence of support networks (43%), the expectation of finding economic opportunities or employment (43%), the perception of greater security (38%), having regular migration status in that country (29%), and geographic proximity to the country of origin (17%) (see Figure 5).

Although 101 Venezuelan respondents were headed to countries where they had previously lived, only 43 indicated that they had regular migration status in those countries—specifically in Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Ecuador. Their previous inability to regularise their migration status in their host countries likely limited their access to rights and basic services such as formal employment, healthcare, housing, and education.⁸⁰ If this was the case, they are likely to face this challenge again upon return.

Figure 5. Reasons for choosing a destination different from the country of nationality, by nationality of respondents
 Answers to the 4Mi question: “What are the reasons for selecting this country?” for those who selected an answer different from their country of nationality in the question “What is your destination country?”, n=197



Note: The subsample of individuals from other nationalities (n=47) is small and should be interpreted with caution.

79 MMC (2024b) *Op. Cit.* | Noticias ONU (2022) *La mitad de los refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela en América Latina no puede costearse tres comidas diarias.* | El Nacional (2023) *Se agrava la crisis migratoria de los venezolanos: los migrantes se desplazan a otros países.*

80 CIVICUS (2022) *“La carencia de estatus migratorio regular impone barreras de acceso a derechos.”* | International Organization for Migration, IOM (2022) *Tres cuartos de las personas refugiadas y migrantes de Venezuela en América Latina y el Caribe siguen enfrentando dificultades para acceder a servicios básicos.*

3.2.5.2. Destinations chosen by respondents with other nationalities

Among the 179 respondents from countries other than Venezuela, three-quarters (74 %) were headed to their country of origin—a considerably higher percentage than for Venezuelan respondents. Among those heading to a different country (n=47), most were from Ecuador (n=21), Peru (n=10), and Cuba (n=7).

Among these 47 respondents, most had Colombia (n=26) as their destination, although other countries in the region were also listed as destinations: Venezuela (n=8)—primarily because they were travelling with Venezuelan partners, Chile (n=3), Ecuador (n=3), Brazil (n=2), Argentina (n=1), Panama (n=1) and Peru (n=1). Additionally, 2 respondents indicated they were migrating south without yet knowing their final destination.

Most of these respondents (34 out of 47) stated that they chose a destination other than their country of origin because they had a support network in that country. Nine people mentioned having previously lived in that country, indicating a smaller proportion of onward migration movements than the Venezuelan respondents. Another 9 cited the possibility of finding economic opportunities or employment, and 5 indicated they chose the destination because they had documentation that allowed them to reside there legally (see Figure 5).

3.2.6. Future intentions of the returning refugees and migrants

Given that the return decisions were made suddenly and were conditioned by the recent changes in U.S. migration policies, a considerable proportion of all respondents in transit (42%) stated that they were unsure about what they would do upon reaching their destination, meaning they did not know whether they would stay there or continue to another location. A further 6% indicated that, for the time being, they planned to stay temporarily (for less than six months), without having defined what they would do afterwards. Three per cent stated that they intended to migrate to another country, and 1% mentioned that they planned to return to their country of origin shortly after reaching their current destination.⁸¹ Meanwhile, 47% of respondents indicated that they would stay in their destination long term (for six months or more).

Regarding those who planned to migrate to another country after reaching their temporary destination (n=42), most (27) planned to head to other countries in the Americas, including Chile (9), Venezuela (4), Peru (4), Ecuador (4), Colombia (3), Argentina (2), Brazil (1) and Canada (1). Others mentioned that they knew they would migrate in the short term but had not yet defined their destination (6), and 8 respondents planned to migrate to Europe, specifically Spain (5), Ireland (1), Italy (1), and Germany (1).

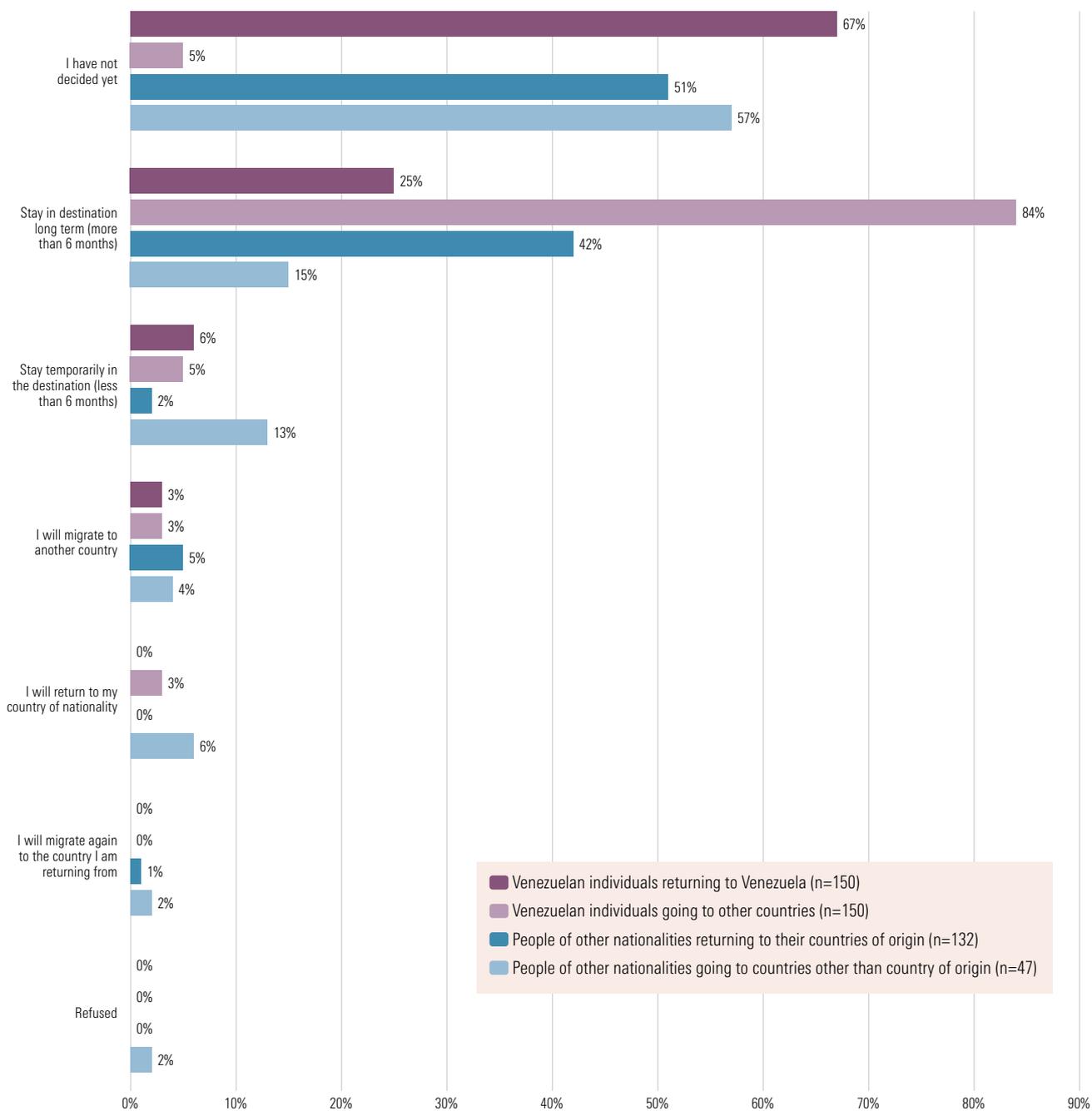
Among respondents, some differences were observed based on nationality and destination. Those heading to their country of nationality (n=282) expressed a high degree of uncertainty (59%) and a lower desire to stay in their country of origin for more than six months (33%, see Figure 6).

The vast majority (84%) of Venezuelans heading to countries other than Venezuela planned to stay long term in those destination countries in the region (for 6 months or longer). In contrast, the majority of refugees and migrants from other nationalities heading to countries other than their own (57%) were uncertain about what they would do once they arrived at their destination (see Figure 6).

81 1% preferred to not discuss their future plans.

Figure 6. Future plans, by nationality and type of destination

Answers to the 4Mi question: "Upon reaching your destination, what is your migration plan for the next 12 months?", n=479



Note: The subsample of refugees and migrants from other nationalities who are heading to countries different from their country of origin (n=47) is small and should be interpreted with caution.

4. Persons in transit who are stranded and risks of return to countries in the region

4.1. Methodology: ProLAC Initiative

This section includes data collected by the regional and harmonised protection monitoring system, ProLAC. The data was gathered between January 21, 2025, and March 31, 2025, by the following organisations: the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Encuentros Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (Encuentros SJM) in Peru, Alianza Vencer in Costa Rica and Corporación Colectiva Justicia Mujer (CCJM) in Colombia. The data collection took place in nine countries in the region: Colombia (430 households), Costa Rica (64 households), Ecuador (234 households), Guatemala (37 households), Honduras (73 households), Mexico (169 households), Panama (38 households), Peru (219 households) and Venezuela (694 households).

4.1.1. Quantitative data collection

The quantitative information includes the results of a household-level survey. The ProLAC Initiative monitors four profiles of human mobility (persons in transit, persons at destination, internally displaced persons, and persons affected by conflict or other situations of violence).⁸² For this report, only households in transit and at their destinations were considered, reaching 1,212 households across the region or 3,322 refugees and migrants.

Persons in transit

The ProLAC sample of persons in transit is based on data collected from individuals in a state of human mobility throughout the region. While this sample may include individuals in the process of returning to their countries of origin or to third countries in the south, the analysis presented focuses on the general situations of the persons on the move in the region. The analysis examines persons in transit in the region in order to understand the regional dynamics of movement and intentions since January 21, as well as the protection risks experienced by the population on the move in light of changes to the context.

During the reporting period, ProLAC reached a total of 546 households or 1,267 persons in transit. These households included 587 persons who identified as women (46%) and 680 who identified as men (54%). Most of the survey respondents were between the ages of 18 and 35 (47%). Just over a quarter (28%) were children and adolescents, 17% were persons between the ages of 36 and 59, and the remaining 1.5% consisted of 19 persons ages 60 or older.

Most of the people surveyed did not report belonging to any ethnic group (96%), while 2% identified as Afro-descendant, 1% as part of an indigenous community, and 1% did not respond. Additionally, 2% (21 individuals) indicated that they identified as a person with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual characteristics (SOGIESC).

Regarding nationality, most of the persons surveyed were Venezuelan (69%), Colombian (14%), Honduran (4%), Ecuadorian (4%), Chilean (2 %) and Mexican (2 %). Also included were less than 1% of respondents from outside Latin America and the Caribbean, including Afghanistan, Angola, Iran and Nigeria. Lastly, less than 1% were Cuban (0.7%), Brazilian (0.5%), Haitian (0.5%), Bolivian (0.2%), Argentine (0.2%), Costa Rican (0.2%), Panamanian (0.1%) and Salvadoran (0.1%).

Among the households in transit surveyed, 318 (58%) identified as stranded at the time of the survey. Just under half of the stranded households were in Central America and Mexico, with 131 households or 41% of the total households in transit in the region. Additionally, 66% of the total households in transit reported that their destination was a country other than the U.S.

*Persons at destination*⁸³

Persons at destination refers to those who intend to stay at least in the medium term (one year) in the country where they are; and who, at the time of the survey, do not intend to continue their journey. This profile includes persons who have applied or intend to apply for asylum or a migration permit, although this is not necessary to be considered a person at destination. It also includes persons who have

⁸² See: Data from the [ProLAC Initiative](#).

⁸³ Persons at destination refers to refugees or migrants who intend to remain in the country where they are and, at the time of the survey, do not plan to continue their journey to another country (see glossary). In the ProLAC survey, a person is considered to have the intention of staying in the country they are in if they plan to remain there for at least one year.

spontaneously returned to their place of origin or to a third country, as well as those who have been deported, expelled or returned to their country of origin or to a third country.

ProLAC reached 666 households, or 2,055 persons, in their destinations during the reporting period. These households included 1,067 women (52%) and 988 men (48%). Most of the persons reached were children and adolescents (44%), followed by persons between the ages of 18 and 35 (35%). 18% were persons between the ages of 36 and 59, and the remaining 3% were persons ages 60 or older.

Most of the persons contacted in their destination did not report belonging to any ethnic group (85%), while 11% identified with indigenous groups, 3% as Afro-descendants, and 1% did not respond. Additionally, 1% (19 persons) identified as persons with diverse SOGIESC.

Most of the persons surveyed were Venezuelan (74%), Colombian (13%), Guatemalan (2%), Honduran (2%), Peruvian (2%), Cuban (1.5%) and Ecuadorian (1%). 1% of the households at destination reported dual nationality, and the remaining 2% included Salvadorians, Panamanians, Nicaraguans, Haitians, Mexicans, Chileans, Indians and Costa Ricans.

Limitations of the quantitative methodology

- ProLAC employs a convenience sampling method, where the surveyed households are those that the ProLAC team finds in the areas and spaces where protection activities and humanitarian aid interventions are conducted. Therefore, the survey results are illustrative and cannot be considered statistically representative of refugee and migrant populations in the region.
- The ProLAC household survey does not allow for the specific identification of persons in a situation of return.
- ProLAC collects data on households in transit accessing protection services provided by ProLAC partners, which limits the possibility of fully understanding the situations of those specifically in return movements from the north.
- Until February 2025, the ProLAC survey did not separate the sub-profiles; returnees and deportees, this distinction can be found in data collected since March 1, 2025.

4.1.2. Qualitative data collection

The qualitative information includes the analysis of six focus group discussions and 25 key informant interviews conducted by ProLAC partners in the nine countries throughout the region. Furthermore, 89 documents from secondary sources (newspaper articles, reports from NGOs and UN agencies, academic reports, etc.) were analysed to corroborate trends observed through ProLAC's data.

4.2. ProLAC's findings

4.2.1. Protection risks

Protection risks: persons in transit who are stranded

In March 2025, 75% of the households in transit interviewed by ProLAC in countries in Central America and Mexico were stranded,⁸⁴ which represents a 22-percentage point increase compared to the period from November to December 2024, as shown in the graph below. Due to the impact of the suspension of funding, the implementation of surveys between February and March decreased. Nonetheless, it is still possible to observe that the trend of stranded households persists.

This unwanted stay in countries other than the intended destination country is due to various factors. On one hand, the increasingly dominant securitisation approach in the region is reflected in the increase of security forces, such as the cordoning off of both the northern and southern borders of Guatemala with the deployment of Kaibiles, known as the country's most feared elite force whose task is to combat drug trafficking,⁸⁵ along with other measures like those once taken by the governments of Costa Rica and Panama to take individuals to shelters while restricting their free movement.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the lack of resources to continue their journey results in individuals being left in legal limbo due to the absence of regularisation and protection mechanisms that align with their situation. As reported by various media outlets, persons find themselves in countries like Mexico, simply waiting, "thousands of persons who remain in Tapachula lack the

⁸⁴ In the current context, common reasons include lack of financial resources, mobility restrictions due to border closures, the waiting period to access an appointment for the immigration process at the destination country, or the impossibility of continuing the journey due to the uncertainty caused by changes to immigration policies, among others.

⁸⁵ Avelar, B. (2025) *Guatemala acoraza sus fronteras con kaibiles, su unidad militar de élite más temida*. El País.

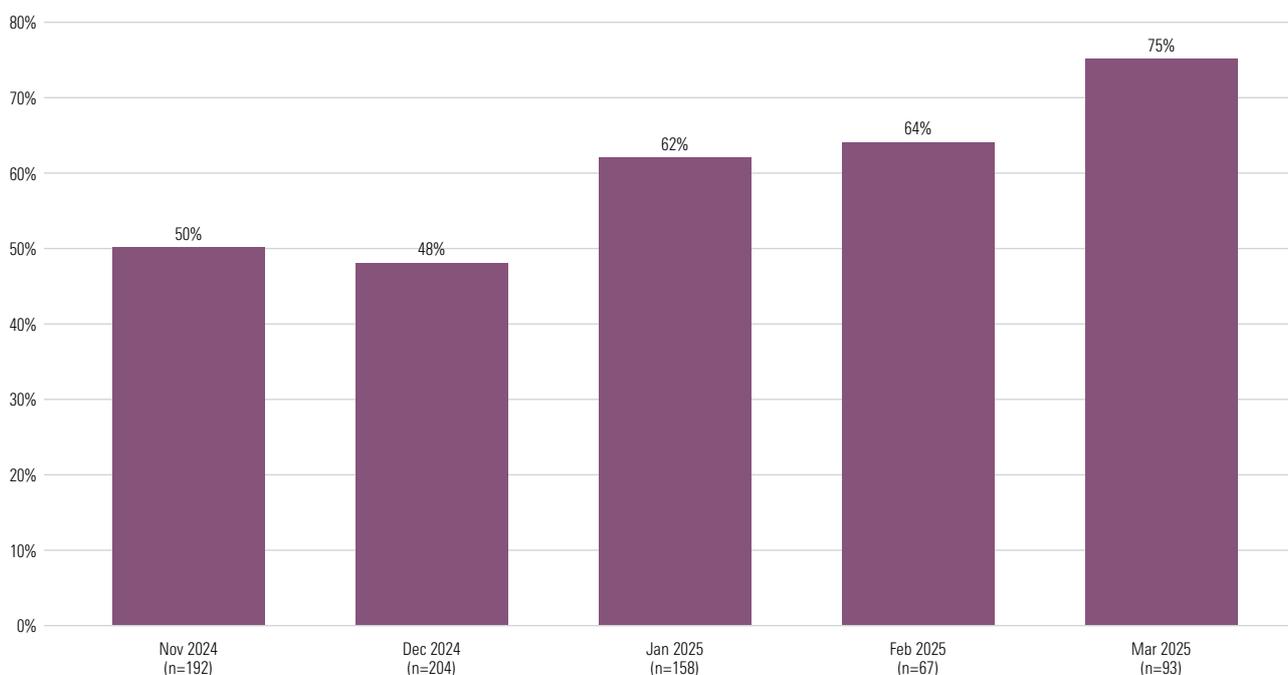
⁸⁶ Bernetti, M (2025). "No somos animales": migrantes rechazan encierro en albergues de Costa Rica y Panamá. AFP

documentation or resources to do anything other than wait. Mexico’s migratory restrictions, adopted under the pressure of the Joe Biden and Donald Trump administrations, prevent them from even leaving the city, and they cannot easily return to Venezuela either”.⁸⁷ Likewise, key informants in Mexico agree that persons are staying longer in this country – in areas monitored by ProLAC – which was previously not the norm.

“What we are seeing in these months of 2025 is that people are not advancing, let’s say, to the north; instead, individuals are rotating between the shelters located in the country.”

Interview with Key Informant, Mexico

Graph 7. Variation of households in transit who are stranded in Central America and Mexico



Source: ProLAC PM

49% of the stranded households during the period of analysis stated that their destination country is still the U.S. The intention to reach U.S. territory, despite the changes in immigration measures, means that these households will remain stranded longer in their current countries: Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama, and Costa Rica.

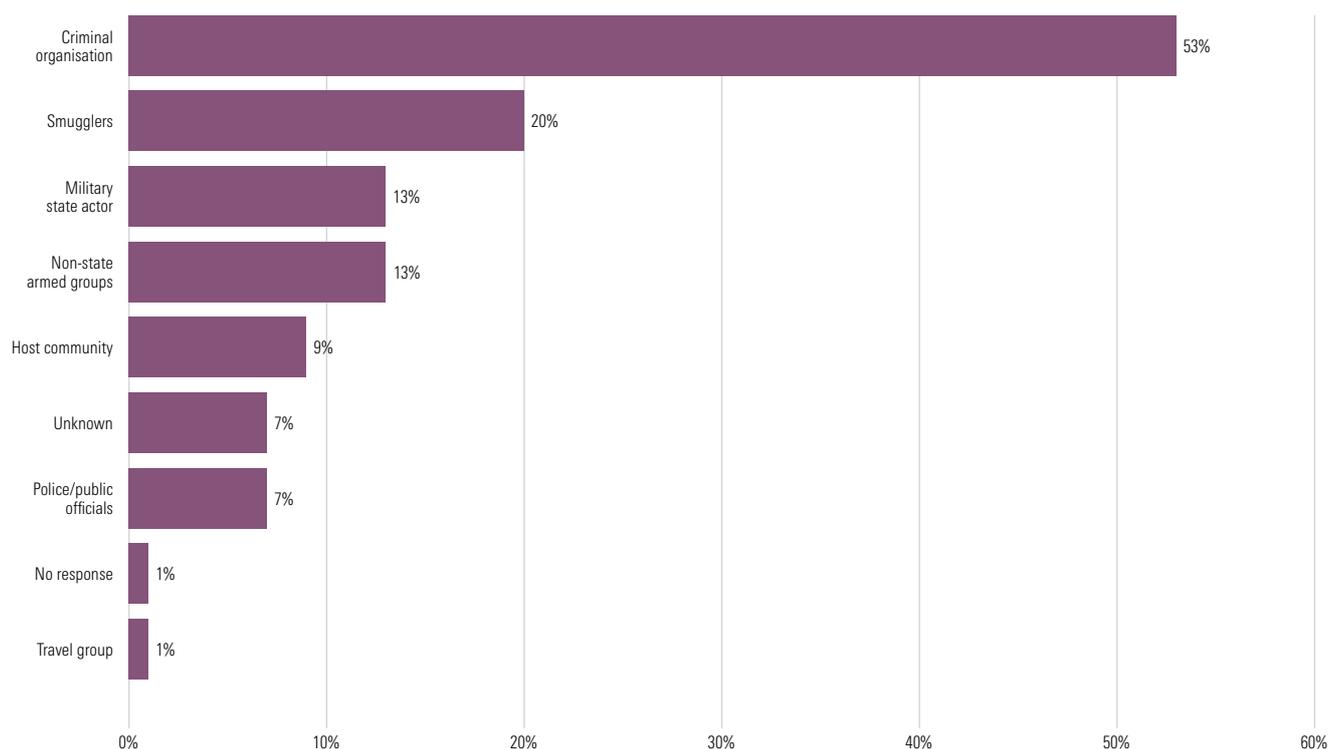
Stranded persons are exposed to multiple risks and, in many cases, experience different abuses simultaneously. 42% of stranded households reported having suffered some form of abuse, compared to 13% of the non-stranded households. On average, 89% of these abuses occurred upon entry to the country of survey and/or while crossing the border, while 11% occurred in other public spaces within the country of survey. Highlighted among the reported abuses are theft, extortion or bribery, discrimination, kidnapping, arbitrary detentions and gender-based violence, with the latter often occurring simultaneously with the aforementioned abuses.⁸⁸ The most frequently mentioned perpetrators were members of criminal organisations (53%). Additionally, among the countries reporting higher rates of abuse of stranded persons, Mexico had the highest frequency, at 85%.

87 Villegas, P (2025). [Trapped and Hungry in Mexico. Migrants Struggle to Return Home](#). The New York Times.

88 ProLAC (2025) [Op. Cit.](#)

Graph 8. Perpetrators of abuses

Multiple choice



Source: ProLAC PM

Some notable traits about stranded households that influence the incidence of abuse are households headed by women caring for children and adolescents (11%), households with at least one person with a serious medical condition (11%), women travelling alone (16%), and households with at least one child and/or adolescent (36%). The frequency of abuse in stranded households with at least one child or adolescent was 55%.

“[Refugees and migrants] express that there is a greater advantage when travelling alone, as opposed to travelling with children, because sometimes you have to yield to certain situations in order to ensure their wellbeing.”

Interview with Key Informant, Mexico

On the other hand, 87% of respondents from stranded households do not have a migration permit or any other type of document that allows them to legally stay in the country where they are. This lack of documentation not only limits their access to opportunities and services but also to justice. It also forces them to restrict their movements within the countries where they are. None of the stranded households in Central America and Mexico that experienced some type of abuse accessed justice mechanisms, for several reasons, including the refusal of state actors to receive their complaints,⁸⁹ fear of retaliation, and even, according to key informants, the fear of being identified by authorities and deported.⁹⁰

89 ProLAC (2025) [Op. Cit.](#)

90 DRC (2025) Interview with Key Informant regarding returns to Latin America, Mexico.

4.2.2. Protection risks: restrictions to access international protection

Since the start of the new administration in the U.S., several countries in Latin America have also implemented practices that undermine the guarantees of international refugee law. In the region, some countries are implementing practices that impose restrictions on the exercise of the right to international protection for refugees and others in need of protection. In February 2025, Amnesty International pointed out that many persons who had been waiting for months for a CBP One appointment to present their cases in the U.S. are now outside the 30-day legal window to apply for asylum in Mexico.⁹¹ The application of the “untimeliness” criterion, which refers to the late submission of an asylum application, in this case, outside the legal period of 30 business days established to enter the country, was declared unconstitutional by federal judges in a 2019 ruling.⁹² The application of this measure would directly affect all those who intended to reach the U.S. and submit their asylum application but were unable to do so and are now stranded in Mexico.

A common barrier to exercising this right is the rejection of asylum applications from individuals who previously had an appointment through the CBP One application in the U.S., interpreting their intention as seeking asylum in that country, despite the fact that in Mexico and the region, this does not represent a legal impediment to requesting international protection. Some key actors have expressed concern about alleged intentions by COMAR officials in offices located on Mexico’s northern border who aim to discourage or fail to support these persons. Furthermore, those who manage to submit asylum applications report delays in the issuance of documents. While this is not new, in the current context, it leaves them in a situation of greater vulnerability and more susceptible to deportation.⁹³

“The immigration officials themselves are the threat. How can I provide evidence of my procedure with the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance? They don’t give me anything.”

Participant in a focus group discussion, Mexico.

For persons whose return to their country of origin could pose a risk to their lives, the obstacles and restrictions to exercising their right to apply for asylum can have serious consequences. According to ProLAC data, of the total number of households in transit and at destination monitored during the reporting period in Mexico (169 households or 398 persons), 56% had not applied for international protection. Nonetheless, two thirds (66% n=111) of these households without asylum applications mentioned risks in their country of origin that align with the criteria set out in the Cartagena Declaration⁹⁴ and the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁹⁵ This suggests that seven out of 10 households would be in danger if they returned to their countries of origin. It is important to highlight that there has been an increase in the number of asylum applications according to ProLAC’s monitoring.⁹⁶ Changes in migration policies have not only left thousands of persons stranded, especially in Mexico, but have had an impact on the number of asylum applications in this country, where approximately 1,000 applications being reported daily, although the Mexican government has yet to publish statistics.⁹⁷

91 Amnesty International (2025). [Lives in limbo. Devastating impacts of trump’s migration and asylum policies.](#)

92 Ibero Ciudad de México (2019). [Jueces declaran inconstitucional el plazo de 30 días establecido en la ley para solicitar el acceso a la condición de refugiado.](#)

93 Amnesty International (2025). [Op. Cit.](#)

94 UNHCR (n.d.) [Cartagena Declaration on Refugees.](#)

95 UNHCR (n.d.) [The 1951 Refugee Convention.](#)

96 During the analysis period, 43.8% of the population in transit and at their destination reported having filed asylum applications in Mexico. Compared to the period between November and December 2024, applications were 35%.

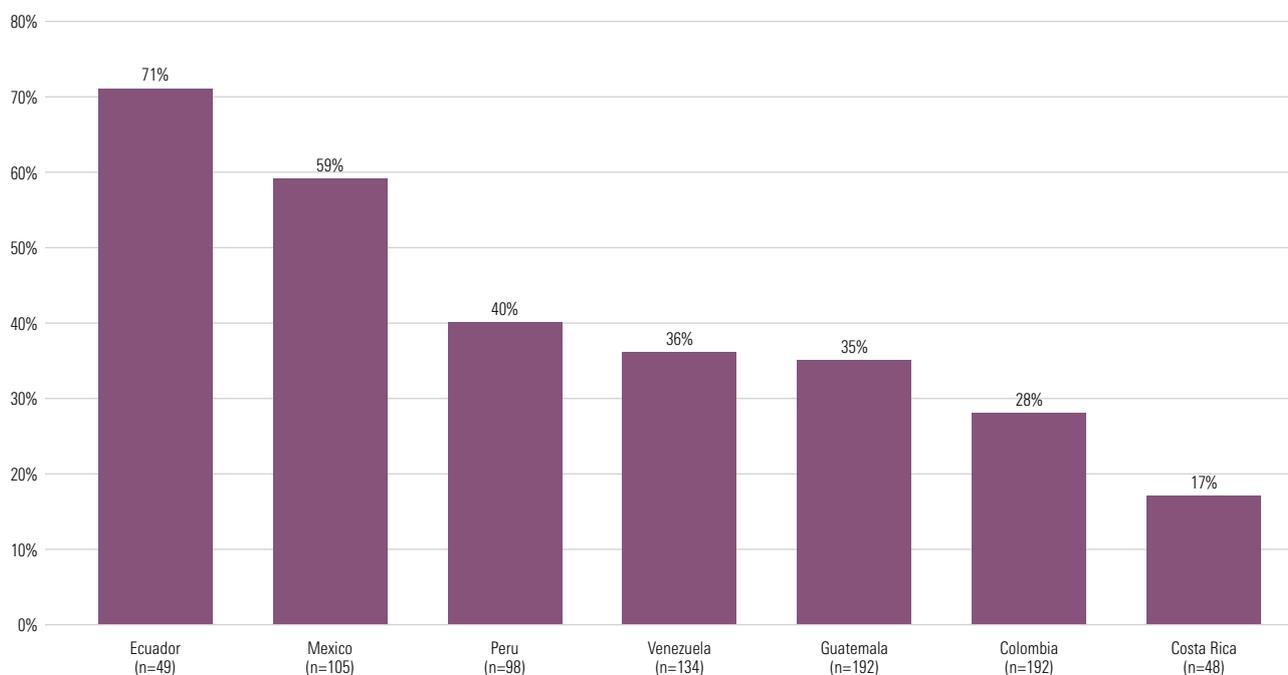
97 Corpi Arnaud, S. (2025) [As Trump ends asylum, is Mexico a viable alternative for those left stranded?](#) The New Humanitarian.

4.2.3. Risks and conditions of return to destination countries in the region

Households at destination that reported abuses during the period of analysis identified five most frequent types of abuse: discrimination (31%), followed by extortion or bribery (30%), psychological abuse (26%), confiscation, theft or destruction of property (21%) and threats (20%).

Graph 9. Frequency of abuses in households at destination by country

Multiple choice



Source: ProLAC PM

The return of persons to their countries of origin or to third countries can expose them to various risks, especially in countries where the conditions that forced them to leave persist and/or where the current circumstances are not favourable to their reintegration. Among the main destination countries mentioned by the refugee and migrant population, primarily of Venezuelan nationality, are Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile (see section MMC "3.2.5. Destination Countries").

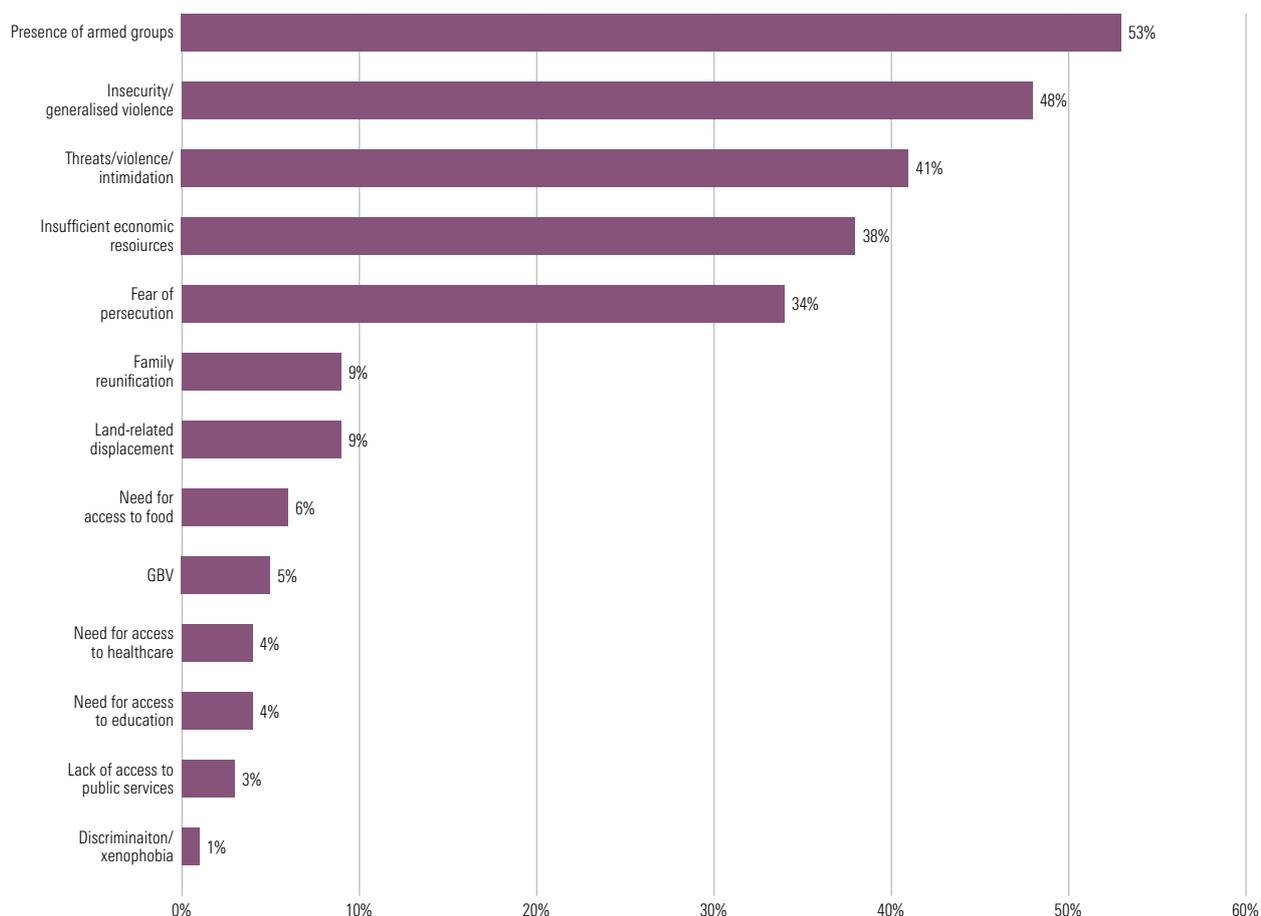
Colombia

In 2024, the humanitarian situation in Colombia deteriorated. In 12 of the country's 32 departments, communities were confined; in five, there were reports of people injured or killed due to explosive devices; and in 14, internal displacements were recorded.⁹⁸ Persons returning to Colombia, whether nationals or foreigners, face a complex situation. In Norte de Santander (Cucuta and Tibu), Arauca (Tame and Arauca) and Nariño (Barbacoas, Olaya Herrera and Tumaco), 58% of the households monitored by ProLAC during the study period had experienced internal displacement, primarily in Norte de Santander (Cucuta and Tibu), Arauca (Tame and Arauca) and Nariño (Barbacoas, Olaya Herrera and Tumaco).⁹⁹ In 99% of cases, the perpetrators most frequently mentioned were irregular armed groups. This phenomenon, along with the economic situation and other protection risks and situations reported by various organisations over the past year in Colombia, reflect a conflict that remains ongoing and continues to force hundreds of persons, not only to be internally displaced but also to seek protection and better living conditions in other countries.

Graph 10 shows the main reasons for departure among Colombian nationals interviewed by ProLAC, whether in transit or at destination in the region. Therefore, it is likely that many of the persons who have left this country have been impacted by this conflict,¹⁰⁰ not necessarily in the mentioned areas but likely in territories where irregular armed groups still have a presence and engage in activities and perpetrate violence. This, in turn, highlights the international protection needs of this population. The potential return of Colombians with these protection needs to places where security conditions do not yet exist would put their integrity at risk.

Graph 10. Percentage of households in transit and at destination with Colombian nationality, by reason for leaving the country of origin

Mutiple choice, n=100 households



Source: ProLAC PM

⁹⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC (2025) [Humanitarian Report 2025 - Colombia](#)

⁹⁹ ProLAC (2025) [Op_Cit](#)

¹⁰⁰ MMC (2025c) [Understanding the motivations and aspirations behind Colombian emigration](#). | In addition to violence, insecurity and conflict (62%), according to this publication from MMC, among 491 Colombians surveyed, 74% emigrated from Colombia due to financial reasons, 27% due to lack of services, and others.

Armed conflict affects both Colombian nationals and individuals from other nationalities, with the vast majority of coming from Venezuela. According to ProLAC's household survey, 7% of internally displaced persons affected by other situations of violence in Colombia were of Venezuelan nationality. The above is not intended to affirm that people who return will necessarily do so to areas affected by conflict, but it is necessary to consider the strength that the conflict has taken in the last year¹⁰¹ and could be a factor making it difficult for persons to return to many territories in Colombia. Likewise, it is necessary to consider the risks to which refugees and migrants entering Colombia via the Pacific route are exposed (see MMC section "3.2.4. *Main routes and dynamics of return migration*"), where areas such as Buenaventura, in Valle del Cauca, are visibly affected by the conflict.

Additionally, returning to Colombia is not only an option for its nationals but also for persons, mostly Venezuelan refugees and migrants, who found their first place of refuge in Colombia (see MMC section "3.2.5. *Destination countries for returned or returning persons*"). Nevertheless, access to migration regularisation is a challenge for refugees and migrants re-entering Colombia. In this country, Decree 216 of 2021 established the Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants, through which the population had access to the Temporary Protection Permit (PPT as abbreviated in Spanish). However, Venezuelans who held the PPT and left Colombia would face the potential cancellation of this permit upon re-entering Colombian territory after being outside the country for more than 180 days.

The cancellation of the PPT will be conducted through an administrative act (a procedure established by Migración Colombia—Colombia's immigration authority), which does not allow for any appeals, challenges or requests for reconsideration.¹⁰² Once the PPT has been cancelled, the person has 30 days to leave the country: "A Venezuelan migrant whose Temporary Protection Permit is cancelled must leave the country within the next thirty (30) days, under penalty of being subject to the corresponding administrative immigration measures."¹⁰³ This procedure would apply to PPT holders who also held a passport and left Colombia regularly (with a passport stamp) for more than 180 consecutive days.

On the other hand, Migración Colombia may grant a Permit for Entry and Stay (PIP as abbreviated in Spanish) to foreigners with a passport (for the Venezuelan population, this can be valid or expired for up to 10 years) whose nationality does not require a visa, and who intend to enter the national territory without the intention of establishing residence or seeking profit, for short stays. In the context of returns, Migración Colombia will allow entry by granting the Permit for Other Activities (POA) - a category of the PIP - that authorizes transit for a period of 15 days, non-extendable, during which Venezuelan individuals must complete the exit control from Colombia (to Venezuela or a third country).¹⁰⁴ However, the specific requirement of presenting a passport overlooks the reality faced by a large portion of the Venezuelan population. According to ProLAC data, between January and March, only 6% of Venezuelans (who were outside Venezuela and Colombia) had a passport. This limited access to the POA presents challenges for safe transit within Colombian territory and would become a driving factor for the use of informal routes and the evasion of official checkpoints or records during their entry into the Colombian territory.

In September 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the Special Administrative Unit of Migración Colombia, enacted Decree 1209 of 2024, which establishes the creation of the Special Stay Permit for Legal Representatives or Custodians of Children and Adolescents (referred to as PEP Tutor). This permit is aimed at persons of Venezuelan nationality. In addition to offering regular stay conditions, it will allow the exercise of any professional activity or trade, under various types of employment contracts. To access this permit, persons must have custody of minors who, as of December 31, 2023, were holders of a valid PPT, did not have any criminal record or immigration sanctions, and did not hold a valid PPT or a valid visa in any class or category.¹⁰⁵ As can be inferred, a large portion of the Venezuelan population returning to Colombia will face difficulties in meeting these requirements and accessing this form of migration regularisation.

101 ICRC (2025). [Informe: Retos humanitarios 2025 - Colombia](#).

102 Decree 216 of 2021, which adopts the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants Under the Temporary Protection Regime and establishes other provisions on immigration matters. See: Presidency of the Republic of Colombia (2021) [Decreto 216 de 2021](#).

103 Special Administrative Unit of Migración Colombia (2021). [Resolución 971 de 2021](#). | Through this Resolution, the Temporary Protection Statute implements the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants adopted by Decree 216 of 2021.

104 Migración Colombia (2025a) [Op_Cit](#).

105 Migración Colombia (2024) [Migración Colombia anuncia la creación de PEP Tutor, un permiso especial de permanencia para representantes legales o custodios de menores venezolanos](#)

Ecuador

In 2023, the country recorded the most violent year in its history, with over 8,000 violent deaths.¹⁰⁶ In January 2024, the executive branch declared the country to be in a “state of internal conflict.” Based on this argument, President Noboa ordered the deployment of the military throughout the country. The military intervention was initially successful in reducing the violence rate. However, criminal groups transformed rather than disappearing,¹⁰⁷ and the militarisation of the streets led to serious human rights violations by security forces.¹⁰⁸ Quarterly data on homicides reported in 2025 exceeds the figures reported in the same period in 2024 by 65% and exceeds by 39% those recorded between January and March 2023, the year in which the country ranked as the most violent in Latin America.¹⁰⁹

The proliferation of criminal gangs and groups is closely linked to drug trafficking, and connected to other crimes such as arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion, and illegal mining, primarily in coastal and border areas characterised by weak institutional presence.¹¹⁰ This situation has led to internal displacements as well as displacements to other countries. In 2024, there were records of 92,888 internally displaced persons because of armed violence. Of the displaced persons, 76% are Ecuadorian, 11% Venezuelan, and 13% were from other nationalities. 30% of the displaced persons have suffered extortion, and 100% report having experienced some form of violence.¹¹¹

Extortion is part of the insecurity landscape faced by Ecuador and is perpetrated by various criminal gangs and organised crime groups. According to 3iSolution, 30% of the internally displaced persons in 2024 were victims of extortion.¹¹² In many cases, this situation has become one of the factors forcing individuals to leave their country. This was recounted by an Ecuadorian woman stranded in Turbo after having been a victim of theft in that area. She stated that she suffered extortion and threats to her life in her home country. When she reported the situation to the authorities, the reprisals were immediate; she received kidnapping threats against her teenage daughter.¹¹³

Attacks against civilians also emerge as a major concern for persons returning, particularly due to debts or loans taken from non-state armed groups to pursue the American dream: “Many incurred debts with armed groups here in Ecuador, so they will face that issue when they return”.¹¹⁴

7% of the households affected by conflict or other situations of violence, monitored between October 2024 and January 2025, reported having been affected by the risk of recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents.¹¹⁵ Recruitment by armed groups and criminal gangs in Ecuador is becoming increasingly prevalent. Criminal groups offer quick money in exchange for criminal tasks, which entices young people with promises of income to help their families, access materials goods, and avoid threats or attacks against themselves and their families.¹¹⁶ The fear of recruitment is not only one of the causes recorded for cases of internal displacement but also linked to family separation and displacement to other countries. Many parents felt the need to go into debt and send their children abroad, with the goal of reaching the U.S. However, they are now threatened again: “There is also fear, many parents sent their children abroad to prevent them from getting involved with armed groups, criminal gangs, and they are now returning or being deported”.¹¹⁷

Within the context of insecurity described by persons in transit and at destination in the country, they face multiple types of abuses. Of the total households surveyed between January 21 and March 31, 47% reported having experienced some form of abuse. While the abuse most reported by households involved discriminatory practices (42%), it is important to highlight the frequency of physical violence (25%), extortion (9%), and gender-based violence, with direct reports of sexual violence (9%). Additionally, when all households were asked about the risks they perceive in their current environment, 29% mentioned physical violence, 14% extortion, and 6% forced recruitment, among other risks. 35% did not know what risks they might face.

Additionally, within the context of insecurity that the country is facing, changes have been implemented in migration policy. Ecuador repealed Decree 370, which since August 2024 had granted amnesty to Venezuelan migrants arriving without documentation, facilitating their legal residency and issuing visas for Venezuelan families,¹¹⁸ thus leaving the refugee and migrant population attempting to settle in the country in a more vulnerable situation.

106 Insight Crime (2024) [Balance de InSight Crime de los homicidios en 2023](#).

107 Insight Crime (2024) [Op. Cit.](#).

108 Human Rights Watch (2025) [Ecuador: Unchecked Abuses Since ‘Armed Conflict’ Announcement](#).

109 Ecuavisa (2025) [Ecuador supera los 2 300 homicidios en primer trimestre de 2025, un 65 % más que en 2024](#).

110 International Rescue Committee, IRC (2024) [Análisis de sensibilidad al conflicto en Ecuador](#).

111 3iSolution (2025) [Desplazamiento interno en Ecuador \(enero – diciembre de 2024\)](#).

112 3iSolution (2025) [Op. Cit.](#).

113 NRC (2025) Interview with Key Informant, Turbo, Antioquia.

114 DRC (2025) Interview with Key Informant regarding returns to Latin America, Ecuador.

115 ProLAC (2025) [Op. Cit.](#).

116 IRC (2024) [Op. Cit.](#).

117 DRC (2025) Interview with Key Informant regarding returns to Latin America, Ecuador.

118 Cañazares, A.M. (2025) [Noboa deroga la amnistía que permitía la regularización de inmigrantes venezolanos sin estatus formal en Ecuador](#). CNN.

Peru

In November 2023, the deadline ended for refugees and migrants to apply for migration regularisation through the Temporary Residence Permit Card (CPP as abbreviated in Spanish) in Peru. That same month, Legislative Decree 1582 came into effect, amending the Legislative Decree on Migration (DL 1350) and incorporating the Special Exceptional Administrative Sanctioning Procedure (PASEE as abbreviated in Spanish).¹¹⁹

During the first quarter of 2025, the National Superintendency of Migration, in collaboration with the National Police of Peru (PNP), carried out 1,123 verification and inspection operations, resulting in the expulsion of 760 foreign persons for violating current immigration laws.¹²⁰ Although the operations are conducted in various locations, they are particularly focused on border areas. These measures reduce the possibilities for integration of the migrant population who, amid changes in U.S. migration policy, consider Peru as a potential destination country. According to MMC, Peru ranks fourth—after Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador—as a destination country identified by persons surveyed by 4Mi (see MMC section “3.2.5. *Destination countries for returned or returning persons*”).

According to the latest report from ProLAC, 65% of the population at their destination in Peru who reported abuse stated that it was related to discriminatory practices and xenophobia.¹²¹ During the period of this report, of the total number of persons who experienced abuse, 77% said it was discrimination. On the other hand, 67% of the surveyed population in transit reported the three main abuses: extortion or bribery at 56%, confiscation or theft at 48%, and discriminatory practices at 28%. Discrimination is often correlated with access to services, opportunities and rights for refugees and migrants. According to the ProLAC report, in Peru, key informants reported that refugees and migrants must often be accompanied by an NGO to access health services.¹²² The same report highlights barriers to accessing justice mechanisms implemented by authorities, especially when refugees and migrants have an irregular immigration status. These barriers hinder the integration of refugees and migrants, which could push them again to seek other destinations, experiencing a cycle of violence and exclusion.

119 The PASEE allows for the expulsion of persons in an irregular migration status or those who represent a threat to order or security within 48 hours. The procedure begins with a detention that cannot last more than 24 hours and is carried out in a single hearing, where the person has the right to present their defence and to have a translator if needed. See: Chávez, G. (2024) [Desafíos actuales de la política migratoria en el Perú](#).

120 Aguilar, A. (2025). [Ordenan la expulsión de más 760 extranjeros por infringir la legislación migratoria vigente](#). Infobae.

121 ProLAC (2025) [Op. Cit.](#)

122 ProLAC (2025) [Op. Cit.](#)

5. Conclusions

The new U.S. administration's migration policies have aimed to obstruct and deter the entry of refugees and migrants into its territory.¹²³ The 4Mi surveys and ProLAC's protection monitoring show that these new measures have had a direct impact on the movements and intentions of refugees and migrants in the Americas. However, the medium- and long-term effects of these measures remain to be seen. The evidence suggests that previous restrictive measures, while leading to temporary decreases in the number of arrivals, did not achieve sustained reductions in migration through the southern border.¹²⁴ Furthermore, in some cases, these measures violate international human rights law and international refugee law.

Due to the restrictions imposed for entry to into the U.S. the plans of a considerable number of refugees and migrants who were in transit to that country have been disrupted, redirecting them to other destinations in the region—among them Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru—or leaving them stranded. Refugees and migrants have had to embark on return journeys fraught with significant protection risks, such as discrimination, extortion, kidnapping, and other forms of violence.

It is important to highlight that, while many refugees and migrants self-initiate these return journeys, such movements cannot be genuinely considered voluntary. They occur in a context marked by restrictive measures that severely limit their options and exert pressure on them to abandon their original plans.

At the same time, none of the main destination countries for north-south returns currently offers a fully conducive environment for the protection and integration of refugees and migrants. In most of these countries, significant barriers to migration regularisation have been identified, along with restrictions to complementary pathways to international protection, and internal violence that affects both returning nationals and persons from other nationalities seeking refuge. Some of those returning also report that their lives would be at risk if they were to return to their country of origin. This limits their access to essential services and exposes them to new risks of persecution, discrimination, extortion, and violence, among others.

Since January 2025, there has been an increase in the number of individuals stranded in transit countries, due to the inability to continue their journeys north. This situation has exposed refugees and migrants to greater protection risks, stemming from the lack of migration documentation, scarcity of financial resources, and widespread insecurity in the various countries where they are located.

While the full implications of the new U.S. migration policies¹²⁵ remain unknown, it is likely that deportations and refugees and migrants returning on their own under conditions of insecurity and lack of protection will continue to rise, as barriers to integration in third countries persist. Likewise, the vulnerable situations and the dangers faced by refugees and migrants in transit, stranded, and at destination could be exacerbated by the growing funding challenges faced by organisations providing humanitarian assistance, further worsened by cuts in U.S. cooperation programmes.

123 Turkewitz, J., Rodríguez Mega, E., and Glatky, G. (2024) [Trump ha dejado clara su opinión sobre los inmigrantes. ¿Impedirá que sigan viajando hacia EE. UU.?](#) The New York Times.

124 Isacson, A. [Fewer Migrants, Greater Danger: The Impact of 2024's Crackdowns](#). WOLA.

125 WOLA (2025). [By Terminating Legal Pathways, the U.S. Is Abandoning Venezuelans](#).

6. Recommendations

To governments

- Strengthen the commitments assumed under the Global Compact for Migration¹²⁶ and the Los Angeles Declaration,¹²⁷ and the Chile Declaration and Plan of Action,¹²⁸ as key frameworks for migration governance and the promotion of the rights of refugees and migrants. This entails reinforcing and expanding regular pathways for entry and accessible, affordable migration regularisation programmes, as well as respecting and guaranteeing access to international protection in accordance with the standards established in the Cartagena Declaration.
- Ensure the free movement of refugees and migrants in transit through their territories by establishing specific mechanisms or providing appropriate documentation that promotes safe migration.
- Respect the non-refoulement and non-penalisation principles, in line with obligations under international law and national legislation. Ensure informed, voluntary, safe, and dignified returns, and promote the reintegration of returnees in their home countries.
- Develop joint strategies between states in the region that address return movements and the root causes of migration, based on shared responsibility and respect for human rights.

To donors

- Prioritise financial support for programmes that strengthen national systems in transit and destination countries, aiming to ensure access to international protection, proper documentation, and access to services, in line with international standard.
- Fund protection and assistance programmes for refugees and migrants in transit and destination countries, with a focus on legal assistance, guidance on international protection, migration regularisation processes, and access to services, particularly in response to the gaps created by the suspension of funding from the United States.

To the United Nations and humanitarian organisations

- Offer technical assistance and support to states in the region with the goal of ensuring the protection and guarantee of the rights of refugees and migrants.
- Implement a regional approach to migration management and strengthen the availability and access to essential services along the migration route, including shelters and care centres, as well as adequate provision of accommodation, food, health services, and others.
- Consolidate protection and assistance programmes for returnees and their host communities, as well as for refugees and migrants in Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru.
- Promote a joint regional analysis of the needs and protection risks faced by returnees and stranded individuals, through coordination and collaboration efforts among organisations, ensuring up-to-date and reliable evidence to inform humanitarian responses.

¹²⁶ The U.S., Mexico, Colombia, and all Central American countries signed the Global Compact for Migration. See: [Global Compact for Migration](#) (2018).

¹²⁷ The U.S., Mexico, Colombia, and all Central American countries—except for Nicaragua—adhered to the Los Angeles Declaration. See: [Los Angeles Declaration](#) (2022).

¹²⁸ The Chile Declaration and Plan of Action 2024-2034 is a regional framework developed by Latin American and Caribbean for cooperation and regional solidarity to strengthen protection and inclusive solutions for refugees, displaced, and stateless persons. It builds upon the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees serves to support the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees. See: [Chile Declaration and Plan of Action 2024-2034](#) (2024).



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