



# Venezuelan Immigration Trends, Challenges, and Possibilities for Integration

# Venezuelan Immigration Trends, Challenges, and Possibilities for Integration<sup>1</sup>

*“El tema ahora es dar el salto y modernizarnos en el tema de regularización migratoria... Vamos hacia la integración, tenemos que trabajar en esto, es la obligación.”<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

The Colombian government’s commitment to integrate Venezuelan migrants as a group in its society represents a strategic and valuable opportunity to focus on social inclusion in the Americas. The steps to deal with integration, however, depend on the specific, differentiated needs of the immigrant community. These steps can be replicated and can contribute to important changes for Venezuelans and migrant host countries in the region.

This memo presents an analysis of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, looking at their characterization, condition, and transnational ties.

Venezuela’s political and economic crises have included a large outmigration of people to several countries, primarily to Colombia. The rapid influx of Venezuelans caught Colombia unprepared, creating distortions in the entire governance system and affecting national, regional, and municipal public policy,<sup>3</sup> particularly because the majority of migrants arrived in vulnerable conditions. This population is perhaps the second largest minority group in Colombia after Afro-Colombians.

In order to explore a pathway to integration, we analyzed the characteristics of this population, the factors that shape those that are more fragile in the process of regularization, and the opportunities to leverage existing capabilities and resources of migrants themselves.

The findings are based on a random survey of 1,061 Venezuelans in five cities and include three important insights:<sup>4</sup>

- Regardless of how migrants arrived (through formal or informal crossings), their gender, income, or education level, the primary reason given for leaving Venezuela is economic hardship.

---

<sup>1</sup> Manuel Orozco, Center for Migration and Economic Stabilization, Creative Associates International, Washington, DC, January 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Lucas Gomez, Manager of the Border in Colombia. October 26, 2020. La Opinión and Estoy en la Frontera.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of current government efforts see, Acoger, Integrar y Crecer: Las Políticas de Colombia frente a la Migración Proveniente de Venezuela. Diciembre 2020, Presidencia de Colombia, Felipe Muñoz Coordinador Editorial.

<sup>4</sup> The survey included 1061 person to person interviews in five cities across the country, Barranquilla, Bogota, Cali, Cucuta, and Medellin, which comprise 38% of all Venezuelans in Colombia. A total of 27 questions about reasons to migrate, intention to stay or return, remittance transfers, demographics, hardship and digital connectivity. Interviewers using street intercept method in areas of migrant concentration in the respective cities.

- One-third of Venezuelans surveyed are considered to be in the most fragile state, meaning they lack regular immigration status, sufficient income, and identity papers. Their fragility is shaped by their age, type of work, and lack of access to financial and government services.
- The majority of migrants maintain strong transnational ties, and those who plan to stay in Colombia have more robust engagement back home than those who want to return.

## Characterization of Venezuelans in Colombia

Between 2015 and 2017, Colombia was overwhelmed by an influx of Venezuelans; their immigration increased tenfold from less than 40,000 to 400,000. By 2020, the number increased to 1.8 million — a number that excludes the thousands of others who crossed the country's borders to continue on to other destinations.<sup>5</sup> Of the estimated 5 million Venezuelans worldwide, nearly 2 million are in Colombia. Moreover, the United Nations expects another outmigration wave that may include more Venezuelans crossing into Colombia this year.<sup>6</sup>

The characteristics of this population do not suggest a wholly homogeneous group.

*Arrival:* Most migrants interviewed say they came to Colombia through the formally established border posts. However, 37% said they crossed the border through informal *trochas*, especially those living in urban areas like Bogotá or Medellín. The reasons for migrating are both economic and political. Asked to list all reasons that apply, 52% said they left Venezuela due to economic reasons (high cost of living, unemployment and, primarily, food scarcity), 38% cited insecurity, and 22% claimed political reasons. One key insight is that these responses did not change across gender, education level, legal status, or method of entry into the country.

Moreover, this migration is indeed a dispersion. Only 33% of those surveyed emigrated alone and left their family in Venezuela. The rest have relatives in other countries. 37% have family in both Colombia and Venezuela; 18% have family in other countries outside of Venezuela and Colombia; and 10% already had family settled in Colombia when they arrived. This dispersion in the Colombian case is rather recent but significant, given the large number of migrants who have entered the country. By the end of 2020, Venezuelans made up 4% of Colombia's population; two years earlier, they made up less than 1%. In fact, 75% of those surveyed arrived in Colombia after late 2017.

*Settling:* Once in Colombia, migrants attest to feeling at ease in the country. Three-quarters of respondents feel well received. However, two-thirds of respondents said finding a job has been the most difficult experience while in the country, followed by finding housing (16%) and getting their legal papers processed (12%). While most

<sup>5</sup> Migración Colombia Infografía. <https://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/infografias/radiografia-venezolanos-en-colombia-corte-a-30-de-octubre-de-2020>

<sup>6</sup> Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan January - December 2021, R4V, p.99.

migrants have a job, only 18% are contributing taxes because most migrants work in the informal economy or for employers that do not enroll them in the social security system. Less than 10% get actual payroll deductions, even though a larger percentage should.

These numbers matter, especially because most Venezuelans in Colombia (63%) say they want to stay rather than return (27%) to their home country or go to a third country (10%).

Other important characteristics of Venezuelan migrants are that they are predominantly young, under 35 (average age is 32), mostly men, and 44% have a university education, practically double of the average Colombian population.

In Venezuela, 13% of them had professional occupations, 11% were students, and 6% worked in personal services (like barbershops, etc.). In Colombia, their skills are underutilized: Over 40% are working in the informal economy, 13% work in the service industry (beauty salons, barbershops, shoe repair work), and only 4% are working in professional occupations. In turn, their incomes are comparatively low at an average of 750,000 pesos per month (US\$217). Colombians, on the other hand, earn around 1.25 million pesos a month (US\$370).

## Immigrant incorporation

The characteristics described above dovetail with migrants' incorporation into the polity. An oft ignored precursor to full immigrant integration into the host society is incorporation,<sup>7</sup> the process by which a migrant establishes ties conducive to social cohesion in the host country.

The attributes of this process include a mix of enabling circumstances in society, such as having legal status to live in the country, establishing a formal or semi-formal relationship with the state (contributing taxes, social security income, accessing services), securing a job and housing, and forming a positive relationship within the social environment.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we theorize that the key elements of incorporation into a host country society are earning a living income, contributing to social security, accessing government services, having a bank account, having legal status, possessing identification documents, and feeling a positive social reception by host country nationals. These aspects constitute a baseline for accessing opportunities or building wealth in the host country.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ponzio, Irene. Modes of migrant incorporation in contexts of socio-economic downward mobility, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Volume 44, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of vulnerability is often utilized in reference to a condition in which people are at risk of being harmed, physically, emotionally, or materially. Economic vulnerability refers to a condition by which an individual or groups are in a weak position in society to build assets and improve their material circumstances. See for example, Orozco, Manuel, "Economic Status and Remittance Behavior Among Latin American and Caribbean Migrants in the Post-recession Period" in *Immigrant Vulnerability and Resilience: Comparative Perspectives on Latin American Immigrants During the Great Recession*, 2015. The OECD uses a similar set of metrics to measure migrant integration, see for example, <http://www.oecd.org/els/mig/indicatorsofimmigrantintegration.htm>.

Using the above components as metrics to measure a threshold of incorporation,<sup>9</sup> we identify individuals as not fully incorporated if they meet three or fewer of those characteristics. Those who meet four of the criteria are considered somewhat incorporated, and those who meet five or more are considered to be in good standing.

More than half of those Venezuelans interviewed in Colombia had low incomes (earnings 15% below the minimum wage), were not contributing to the social security system, and had not accessed government services. Nearly 60% did not have a bank account (a key pathway of economic inclusion), and just over 40% reported not having a regular status (see Table 1).

<b>Table 1: Key elements of incorporation, survey results</b>	
<b>Factor</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Income:</b> Less than 750,000 pesos / month	82.6%
<b>Social security:</b> Does not contribute	81.6%
<b>Government services:</b> Has not received	66.2%
<b>Bank account:</b> Does not have	58.0%
<b>Legal status:</b> Does not have	41.9%
<b>Identification documents:</b> Does not have any	25.4%
<b>Social Reception:</b> Feels as if they have been treated very badly, badly, or ok by Colombians	24.6%

Understanding what affects a fragile incorporation can offer insights into potential interventions that better enable migrant integration. There are many elements that contribute to a well-incorporated population, some of which may be demographic or situational. The analysis of determinants of fragile incorporation point to important insights:<sup>10</sup>

- Not having at least a high school education increases the incorporation fragility by 84%
- Working informally increases incorporation fragility by 169%
- Having less than two years in the country increases incorporation fragility by 47%
- Considering returning to Venezuela increases the incorporation fragility by 160%
- Those under 30 years old have a 72% probability of having a weak incorporation
- Not having a bank account increases incorporation fragility by 711%
- Not having access to government services, particularly from the migration agency, increases incorporation fragility by 14%
- Having left Venezuela for political reasons increases incorporation fragility by 81%

<sup>9</sup> Positive incorporation variables are (a) earnings above 750,000 pesos; (b) contributing to social security; (c) having government issued identification papers; (d) owning a bank account; (e) having legal status in the country; (f) having accessed and received government services; (g) feeling well or very well treated by Colombians.

<sup>10</sup> A logit regression model was used, explaining 38% of all variables. The dependent variable used was not having papers and incomes above 750,000 pesos. The table C in the annex shows the results.

- Having problems getting legal paperwork in order to regularize increases incorporation fragility by 39%

### Transnational ties and the intention to stay

One important trend emerging from the immigrant experience is that in addition to being dispersed, this diaspora, even under frail conditions, maintains strong transnational ties back home. Those ties are household-to-household connections, including calling, maintaining regular exchanges via social media, sending money, and even in-kind material. 74% of Venezuelans send money to their relatives (of those, 70% send to parents), and 10% send in-kind items like food.

Most remittance transactions to Venezuela are performed informally due to the absence of a regularized payment network. However, increasingly, many Venezuelans digitally transfer money to their relatives, using mobile wallets to send funds to personally owned accounts. The average yearly person-to-person transactions add up to US\$455 per person and are 5% lower than what they were sending in 2019.<sup>11</sup>

The aggregate volume is significant and amounts to at least US\$400 million. From Colombia, Venezuelan immigrants make 15 small transactions per year of around US\$30 each on average. This flow of money is a lifeline for at least 750,000 Venezuelan households.

Their ties are also secured through regular communication with families. Migrants consume data to stay connected with their relatives back home. The transnational ties are more relevant to those who want to stay in Colombia rather than with those who want to return. Those who say they want to stay in Colombia send money, call their families more frequently, and have family members only in Venezuela. Out of six different indicators of engagement back home,<sup>12</sup> those seeking to stay are more engaged and send more money back home (see Table 3).

<b>Degree of connection</b>	<b>Plans to return or move elsewhere</b>	<b>Plans to stay</b>
Somewhat connected	72.7%	60.6%
Regularly connected	24.4%	33.4%
Very connected or engaged	2.7%	5.0%

<sup>11</sup> Orozco, Manuel. *Money Transfers to Venezuela*, Washington, DC:2020

<sup>12</sup> Amount over 100,000 pesos, frequency sending over 13 times a year, calling back home more than once a week, communicating via Facebook and WhatsApp.

<b>Connection indicators</b>	<b>Plans to return or move elsewhere</b>	<b>Plans to stay</b>
Remittance amount sent (pesos)	84,185	113,276
Frequency per year	13	17
Amount paid for in kind (pesos)	88,767	132,744
Calls per week	1	2
Regular Facebook and other social media use	Yes	Yes
WhatsApp contacts per week	6	5

**Making integration work**

The results of this study highlight important insights moving forward toward regularization efforts. A pathway to regularization, as desired by the Colombian government, can be better achieved through differentiated approaches to incorporating the migrant population while focusing on those tools that can reach out to migrants through existing vehicles: stepping up technology-based tools for government services and social behavior, increasing financial access by removing barriers to entry, and registering workers to the tax authority, for example.

The prevalence of remittances, albeit informal, also indicates the potential of creating a formalized marketplace. Establishing more formal remittance channels could increase payments sent by 15% and provide much-needed assistance to Venezuelan families that may, in turn, better enable them to remain in their home communities.

## Annex – data

**Table A: Reasons for leaving Venezuela**

Reasons for leaving Venezuela	Method of arrival in Colombia		Gender		Age		Education level		Total
	Informal crossing	Official border	Female	Male	Under 30	Over 30	Did not complete high school	Completed high school	
Insecurity	14.7%	15.3%	15.1%	15.1%	14.3%	15.8%	14.8%	15.4%	15.1%
Cost of living	18.3%	17.2%	17.3%	17.9%	17.6%	17.7%	17.2%	18.3%	17.7%
Job opportunities	7.5%	7.1%	7.1%	7.0%	8.1%	6.3%	9.9%	3.3%	7.2%
Unemployment	13.4%	17.0%	15.4%	16.0%	14.6%	16.8%	15.1%	16.4%	15.7%
Family reunification	3.3%	2.3%	3.0%	2.4%	2.6%	2.6%	2.5%	2.7%	2.6%
Political situation	22.7%	22.9%	23.2%	22.7%	23.5%	22.3%	22.0%	24.2%	22.9%
Access to food	19.9%	18.1%	18.7%	18.8%	19.0%	18.5%	18.3%	19.4%	18.8%
Other	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table B: Family dispersion**

Location of family members	Method of arrival in Colombia		Gender		Age		Education level		
	Unofficial border	Official border	Female	Male	Under 30	Over 30	Did not complete high school	Completed high school	Total
Doesn't know	0.0%	0.2%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%
Most in different countries	7.5%	8.0%	10.8%	6.1%	8.5%	7.4%	6.0%	10.3%	8.0%



Most are in Venezuela, but some are in other countries	11.9%	10.1%	9.7%	11.9%	10.8%	10.9%	8.2%	14.0%	10.9%
We're half and half between Venezuela and Colombia	35.6%	38.8%	35.7%	38.4%	36.9%	38.0%	37.4%	37.3%	37.4%
Most are in Colombia	9.4%	11.2%	11.1%	9.4%	10.4%	10.7%	12.0%	9.0%	10.6%
Most are in Venezuela	35.6%	31.6%	32.4%	34.2%	33.3%	32.9%	36.4%	29.3%	33.1%

**Table C: Challenges of settling in Colombia**

<b>Most difficult part of living in Colombia</b>	<b>Barranquilla</b>	<b>Bogotá</b>	<b>Cali</b>	<b>Cúcuta</b>	<b>Medellín</b>	<b>Total</b>
Finding work	54.70%	76.50%	16.00%	100.00%	65.50%	67.20%
Finding housing	22.00%	16.30%	28.00%	0.00%	15.50%	15.50%
People are unfriendly	2.70%	3.20%	1.30%	0.00%	6.10%	2.60%
Securing papers (PEP, visa, license, etc.)	10.00%	2.30%	54.00%	0.00%	8.80%	11.70%
Getting services	1.30%	0.90%	0.00%	0.00%	4.10%	1.10%
I contracted COVID-19	8.70%	0.30%	0.70%	0.00%	0.00%	1.50%