

# Ecuador Migration Trends

By Nicole Ledesma<sup>1</sup>

## Ecuador's Transformation from a Migrant Sending to a Migrant Recipient Nation

Intra-regional migration in the Americas has increased since the 1990s and doubled between 2000 and 2017.<sup>2</sup> Ecuador's transformation in the last ten years from a traditionally migrant sending to a migrant host and transit nation further illustrates this growing pattern of intra-regional migration.

Ecuador's role as the largest refugee host in Latin America and the Caribbean makes the migration profile more complex.<sup>3</sup> Recent migration flows into Ecuador have included Colombians fleeing violence and Cubans and Venezuelans escaping dire political and economic conditions. This migration profile underscores the continuous mobility of people in the region and the need for policymakers to be proactive in designing policies which account for the varying ebbs and flows of migration.

## Ecuador as A Migrant Sending Nation

International migration from Ecuador was relatively low prior to the 1960s. Ecuador's two major international outflows which occurred in the 1980s and late 1990s into the early 2000s sent 10 to 15 percent of the country's total population abroad.<sup>4</sup>

Year	United States of America	Spain	Other Countries	Total
1990	143,314	3,734	66,683	213,731
1995	223,927	11,606	90,053	325,586
2000	306,208	24,472	115,084	445,764
2005	364,358	456,379	167,280	988,017
2010	435,209	496,666	222,024	1,153,899
2017	470,319	420,344	240,764	1,131,427

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2017). Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 revision (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2017).

The first substantial outflow in the 1980s followed a steep drop in oil prices and a debt crisis. This economic downturn led many Ecuadorians to migrate to the United States, particularly to New York and other cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and Minneapolis.<sup>5</sup> However, the most significant wave of international migration occurred after a much larger economic crisis in the late 1990s. A drop in oil prices, political instability, and the collapse of financial institutions resulted in a large outflow of Ecuadorian migrants. The unraveling of the financial institutions began in 1998 with the closure of a small bank called Solbanco and continued with the government mandated week-long bank "holiday" which forced banks to close. High inflation eventually led the country to dollarize in January 2000.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/CHI807-Migration.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana (<https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/informacion-sobre-refugio/>)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/ecuador-mass-emigration-return-migration>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/ecuador-mass-emigration-return-migration>

<sup>6</sup> IMF Working Paper-The Late 1990s Financial Crisis I Ecuador: Institutional Weaknesses, Fiscal Rigidities, and Financial Dollarization at Work

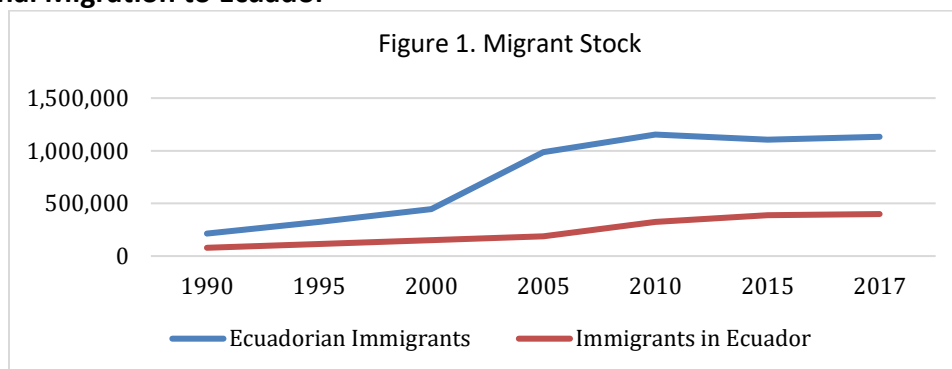
During this crisis, GDP declined over 20 percent and GDP per capita regressed about 13 years, mirroring 1977 levels.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that over a million and a half Ecuadorians emigrated as a result of this crisis.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Ecuadorian migration doubled between 1990 and 2000.

At the time, Ecuadorians could enter Spain without a visa, allowing many Ecuadorians to enter with ease.<sup>9</sup> Ecuadorians traveled mostly to Spain, the United States, and Italy.<sup>10</sup> By 2003, there were over 390,000 Ecuadorians in Spain, becoming the largest immigrant group in the country.<sup>11</sup> However, that same year, Spain enacted a visa requirement, which greatly limited the migration flow to the country.<sup>12</sup> Not too long after, the 2008 global recession deterred additional migration to Spain and the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, programs were created to help Ecuadorians return to their native country. In 2008, the Ecuadorian government’s “Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa” helped reintegrate returning migrants. The program dovetailed with initiatives in Spain that helped both authorized and irregular immigrants return to their home country. These programs paid for returning migrants’ transportation back home.<sup>14</sup> A census conducted by the Ecuadorian government found that one in every four Ecuadorians that migrated between 2001-2010 returned home.<sup>15</sup>

The stock of Ecuadorian migrants abroad is still relatively large, but the outflows which characterized Ecuador as a migrant sending nation have not continued in recent years. Data from the United Nations shows that between 2005 and 2010 the number of Ecuadorians abroad only increased by 165,000. Between 2010 and 2015 the number of Ecuadorians immigrants actually decreased, and the total stock of migrants stalled at about 1.1 million in 2017.<sup>16</sup>

### International Migration to Ecuador



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2017). Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 revision (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2017).

<sup>7</sup> IMF Working Paper-The Late 1990s Financial Crisis I Ecuador: Institutional Weaknesses, Fiscal Rigidities, and Financial Dollarization at Work

<sup>8</sup> IOM Ecuador Migration Profile 2008

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie\\_de\\_publicacion/interrogar\\_la\\_actualidad/la\\_politica\\_de\\_visados\\_para\\_el\\_siglo\\_xxi\\_mas\\_alla\\_de\\_la\\_cola\\_del\\_visado](https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/interrogar_la_actualidad/la_politica_de_visados_para_el_siglo_xxi_mas_alla_de_la_cola_del_visado)

<sup>10</sup> Censo de Población y Vivienda, 2001-Sistema Integrado de Indicadores Sociales del Ecuador – SIISE (<http://www.siise.gob.ec/siiseweb/siiseweb.html?sistema=1#>)

<sup>11</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística (<http://www.ine.es>); [http://www.ine.es/revistas/cifraine/cifine\\_ext0605.pdf](http://www.ine.es/revistas/cifraine/cifine_ext0605.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie\\_de\\_publicacion/interrogar\\_la\\_actualidad/la\\_politica\\_de\\_visados\\_para\\_el\\_siglo\\_xxi\\_mas\\_alla\\_de\\_la\\_cola\\_del\\_visado](https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/interrogar_la_actualidad/la_politica_de_visados_para_el_siglo_xxi_mas_alla_de_la_cola_del_visado)

<sup>13</sup> Reintegration upon return: insights from Ecuadorian returnees from Spain; Published on behalf of the International Organization for Migration

(<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/imig.12288>)

<sup>14</sup> Boletín del Sistema de Información sobre Migraciones Andinas - FLACSO Sede Ecuador - N.º 10 - Junio 2011

(<https://repositorio.flacsoandes.edu.ec/bitstream/10469/3049/1/BFLACSO-AM10-01-Moncayo.pdf>)

<sup>15</sup> Ministerio De Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana (<https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Proyecto-Apoyo-a-la-Comunidad-Migrante.pdf>)

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Population Division’s Migrant Stock Data

## Ecuador as a Host Country

Migration to Ecuador was uncommon in the 20th century, but after 2001, the number of Colombians fleeing armed conflict in the country turned Ecuador into a destination country. Over time, Colombian migrant flows increased dramatically from 70,000 in 2000 to 190,000 in 2010.<sup>17</sup>

Diverse flows of migrants began entering the country in 2008 when the Ecuadorian government allowed people from all nationalities to enter without a visa. Migrants came from South America as well as Asia and the Caribbean. In 2010 the Ecuadorian government renewed the need for a visa for nine countries in Asia and Africa, as a response to the increase in migrant inflows.

While Ecuador has seen a diversification in the immigrants residing in the country, the top five immigrant communities in the last 17 years have consistently come from Colombia, the United States, Peru, Chile, and Venezuela—in that order.<sup>18</sup> Colombians remain the largest immigrant population in the country with almost 400,000 residing in Ecuador in 2017.<sup>19</sup> Ecuador has also been majorly impacted by the influx of Venezuelans migrating throughout the Americas. While entries of Venezuelans to the country are not new, they are on the rise. Estimates place the total numbers of Venezuelans in Ecuador at about over 200,000.<sup>20</sup>

As seen in Table 2, entries into Ecuador have increased dramatically—an increase of over 400,000 measured in 2015 as compared to 2010. Net entries into Ecuador have also increased with Venezuelan net entries being the highest in 2017.<sup>21</sup> Figure 2 shows the ratio of the entries and exits for different groups in Ecuador. In the last two years, more Venezuelans, Cubans, and Colombians have come in to the country than have exited, contributing to the country's increasing migrant stock.

Table 2. Top 10 Nationalities in Ecuador Ranked by Net Entry									
Nationality		Total Entry	Net Entry 2010	Nationality	Total Entry	Net Entry 2015	Nationality	Total Entry	Net Entry 2017
Total		1,038,763	32,276	Total	1,444,260	46,257	Total	1,613,553	91,522
1	Colombia	202,168	15,232	Cuba	71,948	25,866	Venezuela	288,005	61,138
2	Peru	153,151	9,320	Haiti	12,605	9,063	Colombia	334,345	17,082
3	Spain	58,608	2,966	Venezuela	95,909	7,531	Peru	139,151	3,848
4	Cuba	26,850	1,742	Colombia	336,460	6,270	India	13,501	3,012
5	Chile	28,220	689	Senegal	2,948	2,889	Argentina	44,678	593
6	China	7,722	555	Peru	150,643	2,570	China	32,443	590
7	Haiti	1,622	444	Spain	65,007	1,461	Gambia	563	557
8	Eritrea	415	404	India	9,020	1,414	The United States of America	247,778	437
9	Bangladesh	361	275	The Dominican Republic	4,275	1,396	Cameroon	489	389
10	Pakistan	514	208	Ghana	293	213	France	25,610	359

Source: Ecuador's Ministry of the Interior exit and entry data.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Population Division's Migrant Stock Data

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Population Division's Migrant Stock Data

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Population Division's Migrant Stock Data

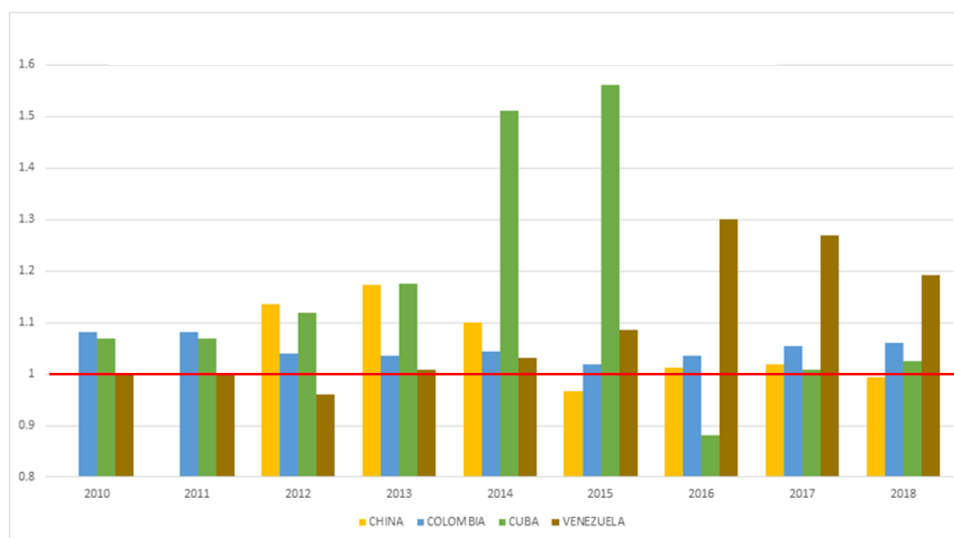
<sup>20</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/dtm/venezuela\\_dtm\\_201809.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/dtm/venezuela_dtm_201809.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Net entry is the total number of entries remaining after subtracting the exits pertaining to a certain nationality

## Ecuador as a Place of Transit

When looking at Ecuador's migration profile, it is important to also recognize its role as a transitional hub. Exit data (the difference between total entry and net entry) helps shed light on the country's transitory role. As seen in Table 2, in 2010, over a million Colombians entered Ecuador, but when considering the outflows, there was only an increase of 15,232 Colombians. Nonetheless, the total stock of Colombians in the country remains high.

Figure 2. Entry/Exit Ratio Change



Source: *Entry and exit data from Ecuador's Ministry of the Interior.*

Note: Above 1 means more people stay in the country.

Likewise, 2010 entry data shows that over 20,000 Cubans entered the country, yet net entries only totaled 1,742 Cubans. Similarly, 'extra-continentals' (migration from Asia and Africa) used Ecuador as a transit nation. In 2010, over 7,000 Chinese individuals entered the country but only 555 stayed.<sup>22</sup>

Venezuelans have also been using the country as a temporary means to reach their final destinations. During the first week of August 2018 about 30,000 entries from the Colombian border were recorded averaging to more than 4,000 migrants a day.<sup>23</sup> This has placed tremendous pressure on Ecuador, resulting in a government declared state of emergency on August 8, 2018.<sup>24</sup> Particularly, between January and August 2018, 641,253 Venezuelan entries and over 500,000 exits were registered, leaving net 116,419 Venezuelans in Ecuador from this seven-month period.<sup>25</sup> Over two-thirds of Venezuelan migrants arriving in Ecuador continue their journey to other countries like Peru and Chile.<sup>26</sup>

The migrants' next destination varies per origin country. The most frequent countries that foreigners travel to next have consistently been to Colombia, Peru, and the United States.<sup>27</sup>

## Refugees in Ecuador

In addition to being a migrant recipient and transitional host country, Ecuador hosts the most refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>28</sup> Early refugee flows to Ecuador date back to the Holocaust when Jewish

<sup>22</sup> Flujo de ciudadanos de todas las nacionalidades ([ministeriointerior.gob.ec/migracion](http://ministeriointerior.gob.ec/migracion))

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/8/5b6d4f554/unhcr-ramps-response-ecuador-declares-emergency.html>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/8/5b6d4f554/unhcr-ramps-response-ecuador-declares-emergency.html>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/dtm/venezuela\\_dtm\\_201809.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/dtm/venezuela_dtm_201809.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63088>; <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/8/5b6d4f554/unhcr-ramps-response-ecuador-declares-emergency.html>

<sup>27</sup> Entrada de extranjeros por país de procedencia- Anuario ESI 2017 (<http://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/migracion/>)

<sup>28</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana (<https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/informacion-sobre-refugio/>)

populations fled their countries in search of safety.<sup>29</sup> A much larger proportion of the current Ecuadorian refugee population is composed of Colombians that have moved to Ecuador to escape conflict in their country, such as violence from Guerrilla groups and consequences of Plan Colombia.<sup>30</sup>

The Ecuadorian government has officially recognized 64,708 refugees and over 175,000 asylum seekers.<sup>31</sup> While the refugees come from over 70 different countries, historically about 98% of the refugees have been from Colombia. The additional 2% of refugees come from countries such as Cuba, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, amongst others.<sup>32</sup>

Ecuador surpasses its neighbors in accepting refugees, however only about 62% of refugee applications have been accepted from 1989 up until October 2018.<sup>33</sup> Over 28% of Ecuador's refugees were officially recognized between 1989-2006—with a record number accepted in 2009.<sup>34</sup> Up until 2009, the applicants were mostly Colombians followed by Peruvians and Cubans.<sup>35</sup> After 2009, there was a decreasing number of refugees in the country, but the trend shifted upwards in 2018. Recent record inflows of Venezuelans entering the country has likely contributed to this recent increase in refugees.<sup>36</sup>

Venezuelans have become the second largest asylum-seekers in Ecuador.<sup>37</sup> Since 2016, about 7,000 Venezuelans have sought asylum status.<sup>38</sup> According to a UNHCR, IOM, and WFP 2017 profiling review of Venezuelans in the country, "96 per cent of those interviewed cited violence and insecurity among the reasons for leaving, and at least 45 per cent claimed to have left for reasons that would qualify them to seek and obtain refugee status."<sup>39</sup> It is likely that there will be additional pressure on Ecuador to accept more refugees in order to assist the Venezuelans fleeing their home country.

## Implications

Over the past ten years, Ecuador has transformed from a country characterized by outmigration to a migrant recipient nation, transitional host, and home to refugees. A strong understanding of its migration flows will allow the Ecuadorian government to respond to imminent challenges and opportunities.

Continuous evaluations of migrants will provide insight on the varying needs of those that choose to integrate or continue their journey to their final destination. Ecuador's role as the largest refugee host in Latin America and the Caribbean presents an opportunity to develop exemplary programs, enact efficient legislation, and coordinate with international organizations to address migrants' immediate and long-term needs.

Increased mobility in the region means that complexity of migration profiles will endure. As a result, frequent assessments are essential in addressing the implications of different migration flows. Coordinated regional efforts can use such analyses to be proactive, respond appropriately, and ensure the safety and well-being of migrants and refugees.

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<sup>29</sup> Ecuador Virtual Jewish History Tour (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ecuador-virtual-jewish-history-tour>)

<sup>30</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana Ecuador; <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/colombians-flee-war-without-end>;

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.hias.org/ecuador>; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana Ecuador

<sup>32</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana Ecuador ([https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/grafico\\_historico\\_refugiados\\_por\\_pais\\_origen\\_noviembre\\_2018.pdf](https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/grafico_historico_refugiados_por_pais_origen_noviembre_2018.pdf))

<sup>33</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana Ecuador

<sup>34</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR Asylum Seekers Database

<sup>36</sup> Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana Ecuador

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.hias.org/ecuador> and <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63088>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/8/5b6d4f554/unhcr-ramps-response-ecuador-declares-emergency.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63088>