



AN UNPRECEDENTED MIGRATION CRISIS

Characterizing and Analyzing
its Depth

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Cover Image: Government of Panama, Migración Panamá account on X (formerly known as Twitter), <https://twitter.com/migracionpanama/status/1714056221282500997/photo/2> , The image has been edited in black and white with a blue filter

Layout: Patrick Springer

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Describing and Explaining the Migration Crisis

This report offers a look at the current migration trends and points to large differences that characterize this situation as a crisis: the scale, composition, nature, and management of migration is outside conventional or historical patterns. Aspects of this unprecedented migration pattern are not within the control of government authorities and policy makers. The recent migration wave to the US border has been referred to as a crisis. Media references point to the drama of people arriving and passing through the Darien, Central America, and Mexico to characterize the problem. Others have pointed out the increasing arrivals into US cities in numbers that are hard to manage by local communities.

Some indicators to offer a dimension of this as a crisis are as follows:

BETWEEN JANUARY 2021 AND SEPTEMBER 2023, 7.5 MILLION IRREGULAR MIGRANTS HAVE ARRIVED AT THE US BORDER WITH MEXICO

THAT NUMBER REPRESENTS 7,800 DAILY ENCOUNTERS IN 2023 FOR ONLY 9 BORDER PATROL SECTORS (48 OFFICIAL LAND BORDER CROSSINGS) OF THE BORDER WITH MEXICO AND TO WHICH THEY PERFORM THE FOLLOWING:

1.3 MILLION ARE APPREHENDED; 579 THOUSAND EXPELLED; AND 1 MILLION REGARDED INADMISSIBLE

IRREGULAR ENTRY MAY AMOUNT TO 4 MILLION PEOPLE SINCE AUGUST 2020

APPREHENSION CASELOAD QUADRUPLED FOR 5,000 EMPLOYEES

**THESE ARRIVALS REPRESENT ALMOST 1% OF THE US POPULATION
IN 2022 AND 2023 RESPECTIVELY**

**THIS IS THE HIGHEST NUMBER IN HISTORY, AND DOUBLE THAN
ANY OTHER REFERENCE YEAR SINCE 1990**

**THERE IS ALSO AN INCREASE OF MIGRANTS TO LATIN AMERICAN
AND CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES TO MORE THAN 10 MILLION PEOPLE
IN 2023, LARGELY LED BY VENEZUELANS**

**THIS SITUATION SPREADS THE CHALLENGE OF MOBILITY BEYOND
A FEW COUNTRIES BUT OVER 10**

THE NUMBER OF COUNTRIES SERVING AS IN-TRANSIT OR MIGRANT HOST COUNTRIES EXPANDS, FROM COLOMBIA, PANAMA, COSTA RICA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, CHILE, OR MEXICO TO LESSER-KNOWN COUNTRIES LIKE NICARAGUA ALLOWING DIRECT FLIGHTS TO MANAGUA FROM PORT-AU-PRINCE

THE NUMBER OF NATIONALITIES SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE US SHIFTS FROM MEXICO AND THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE TO A WIDER RANGE FROM NICARAGUA, CUBA, HAITI, VENEZUELA, TO RUSSIA, BURMA, AND UKRAINE:

STATE FRAGILITY DEFINES THE NATURE OF MIGRATION: OVER 30% OF ALL MIGRANT ENCOUNTERS COME FROM THESE 7 NATIONALITIES

ARRIVALS ARE NO LONGER A MATTER OF SINGLE, MALE MIGRATION

1 IN 20 IS AN UNACCOMPANIED MINOR, HALF OF WHICH COMES FROM GUATEMALA

30% ARE FAMILY UNITS ARRIVING AT THE BORDER, A NUMBER THAT HAS NO PRECEDENT BEFORE 2000

THE INTENTION TO MIGRATE FROM CENTRAL AMERICANS IS OF 1 IN 4 HOUSEHOLDS, BUT ABOUT 10% OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS ENDS UP WITH A MEMBER MIGRATING EVERY YEAR SINCE 2018

THERE IS NO OTHER PRECEDENT IN HISTORY WITH AS MUCH AS A LARGE OUTFLOW, NOT EVEN DURING THE CIVIL WARS OF THE 1980S

The common denominator is political stability, which manifests differently in every country but mostly on the economic downturn of a non-democratic regime (like Venezuela or Haiti) or the massive expulsion of people as a matter of state policy, as is in Cuba and Nicaragua

Pull factors may have played a role too – particularly the rapid drop in unemployment during the pandemic which correlated with the dramatic increases.

About the Scale of Migration

At least from Latin America and the Caribbean the number of people migrating has increased from 33 million in 2015 to 45 million in 2022 – eight million of which since 2020. This increase is mostly reflected in migration encounters at the US-Mexico border is a key indicator of the unprecedented scale of people arriving to the border and is a good starting point.

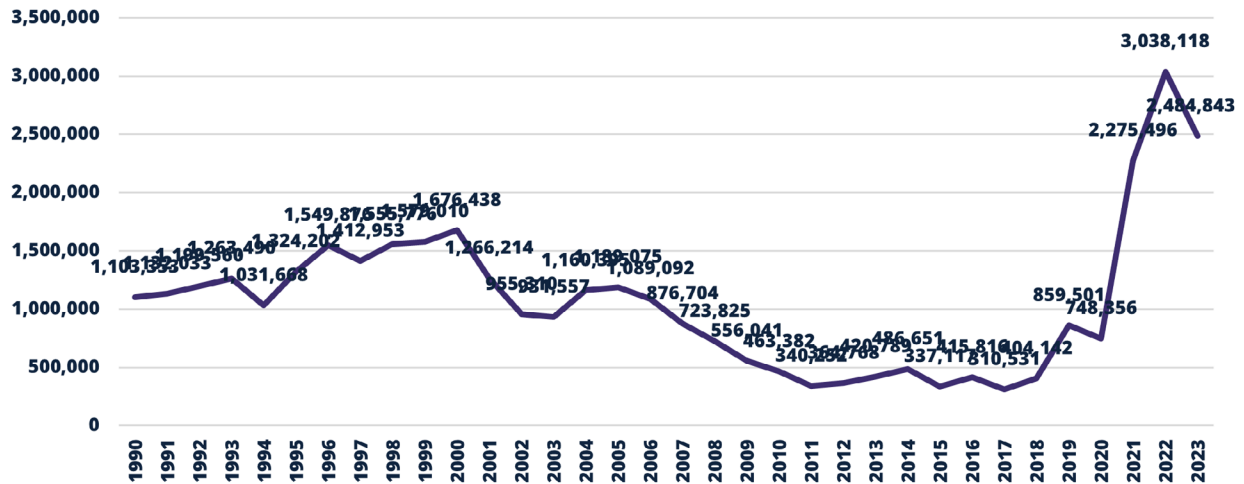
First, within the years 1990 to 2023, the current scale of the crisis is so large that the largest number of irregular border arrivals is 2021 to 2023. Migration flows to the United States have more than doubled to over eight million people annually from 2020 and 2023. The sustained increases in the past two years are exceptional given that migration inflow to the United States in 2019 was already large – nearly a million. This means that in 2020 encounters increased from 1,700 to 7,800 daily arrivals. That number alone is illustrative of the effect it has on the number of border posts operating across the nine sectors, 48 official land border crossings of the border with Mexico.

These migrant border arrivals have doubled relative to the size of the United States population from 0.4 percent in previous decades to nearly one percent of the population in 2022 and 2023.

Migration to Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, the DR, has also increased in large numbers. With these countries capturing more than 20 percent of all migrants from LAC. Chile is now host to 1.7 million migrants and 17 percent of all migration originates in eight countries. Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Panama have become destination and transit countries for hundreds of thousands of migrants.

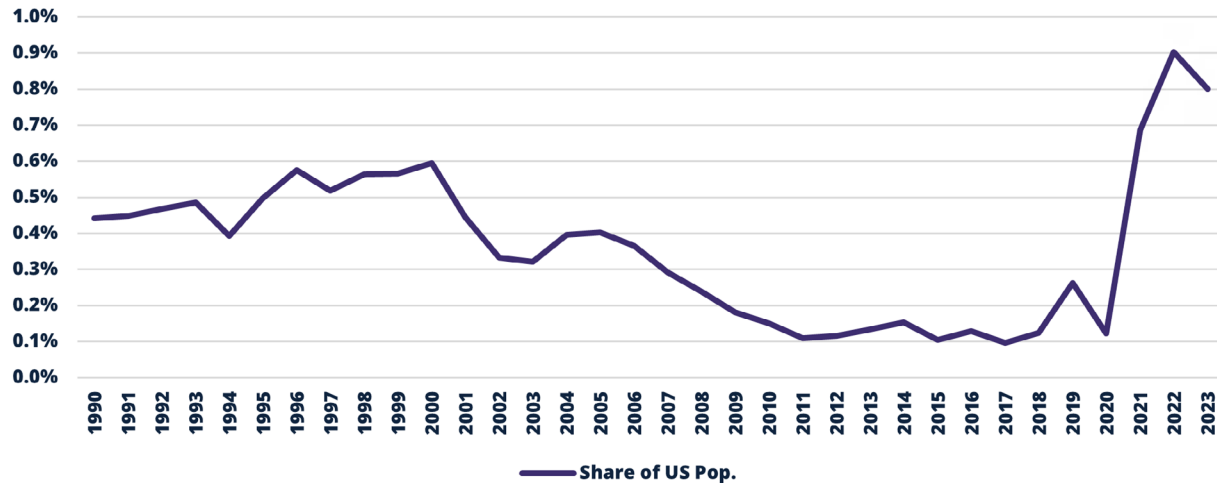
GRAPH 1: ENCOUNTERS OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER, 1990-2023

Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters



GRAPH 2: ENCOUNTERS AS SHARE OF THE US POPULATION, 1990-2023

Source: World Bank Development Indicators and DHS Nationwide Encounters

**TABLE 1: MIGRATION TO LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES**

Source: UNDESA

Country	2010	2022	LAC Percent of total Immigration as Perc. Of Pop.
Brazil	592,640	1,122,896.32	48%
Chile	375,388	1,710,815.60	93%
Colombia	130,309	2,500,000	97%
Costa Rica	405,779	541,558.16	90%
Dominican Rep.	395,479	627,945.76	91%
Ecuador	375,253	816,178.48	82%
Mexico	969,710	1,245,528.96	23%
Panama	157,788	325,691.60	77%
Peru	104,706	1,273,499.76	88%
Uruguay	76,303	112,597.68	61%
United States	44,183,643	53,164,477.80	49%
Selected countries	47,766,998	62,922,798.84	53%
LAC share of immigration	3,583,355	9,758,321	

The scale is unique; and the news reports on how people are overcrowding cities and borders attest to this. For example, in comparison to the estimated 250,000 migrants who passed through the Darien jungle last year, 2023 is seeing a near doubling of this number. Between 400,000¹ and 435,000² migrants are estimated to have crossed into Panama according to Panamanian officials.

The latest data release by the government of Panama shows³ that from January to August of this year, 333,704 crossed the jungle, 53.2 percent being adult men (177,535), 25.34 percent adult women (84,546), and 21.46 percent children (38,156 boys, 33,467 girls). Concerning the nationalities of travelers⁴, around 90.74 percent came from South America and the Caribbean:

- 32% Venezuela
- 5% Ecuador
- 71% Haiti
- 38% Colombia
- 22% Chile
- 95% Brazil
- 69% Peru
- 21% Cuba
- 14% Dominican Republic

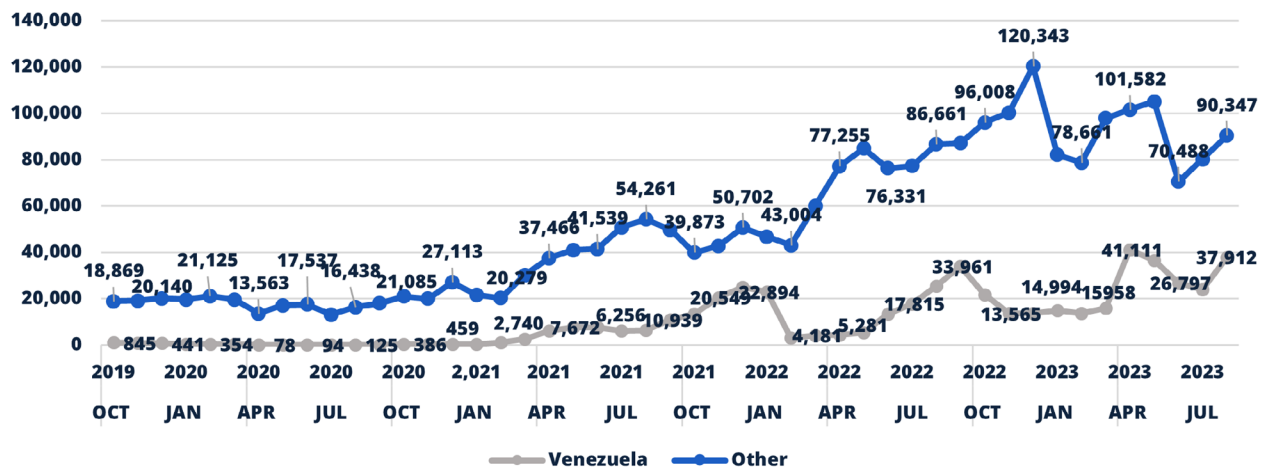
migrants detected by Panamanian officials with those from China (3.89 percent) India (1.00 percent), and Afghanistan (0.75 percent) among the most frequently observed. Interestingly, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of Africans crossing this border has declined by 65 percent since 2022.⁵

However, these numbers may be higher than what is reported. The majority of Venezuelan and non-Central American arrivals come through Darien – with the exceptions of Cubans and Haitians who are using Nicaragua (and Honduras to a much lesser extent) as a passthrough point. Venezuelan and extra-continental migrants the large majority coming through Panama, and they amount to over 100,000 people per month in arrivals to the Mexico-US border. That’s at least 3,000 people a day.

Extracontinental travelers comprised 9.26 percent of

GRAPH 2: NATIONWIDE ENCOUNTERS, 2019-2023

Source: DHS Nationwide Encounters



Haitians and Cubans have been arriving at Nicaragua’s airport on chartered flights in large numbers. Flight data from August to October points to more than 260 flights that amount on average to more than 30,000 Haitians. That is nearly 60 percent of all US-Mexico border Haitian arrivals. A similar situation is found for flights from Havana to Managua, amounting to some 50 monthly flights in motion during 2023, that’s 5,700 passengers on average per month, 40 percent of the number of arrivals to the US-Mexico border. Between June and October 29, 2023, Nicaragua doubled the number of arrivals, totaling an estimated of 60,000 passengers. Since January, when it started to offer charter flights from Havana to Managua, Nicaragua has been a bridge for nearly 100,000 people, or 4.5 percent of all irregular entries to the United States border with Mexico.

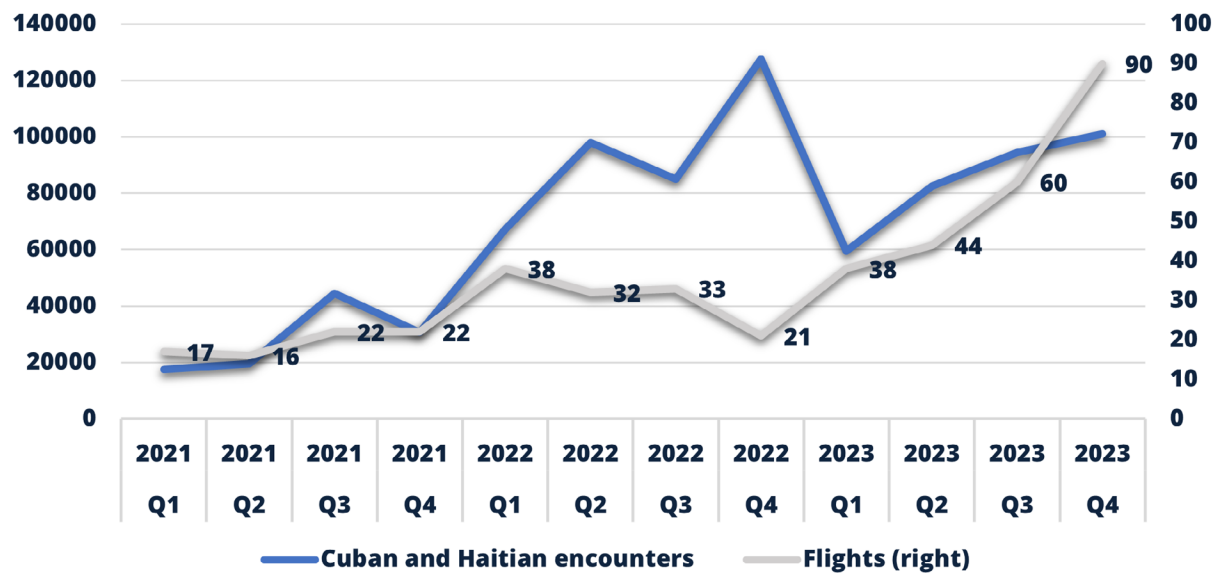
TABLE 2: DIRECT FLIGHTS FROM PORT AU PRINCE TO MANAGUA, NICARAGUA

Source: <https://www.flightaware.com/live/airport/MUHA/departures>

2023	Passengers	Flights	Border encounters
August (4 th week)	3,000	30	19,769
September	11,435	100	18,402
October (3 weeks)	17,040	138	16,500
8 weeks	31,475	268	54,671

GRAPH 4: MIGRATION FROM CUBA AND HAITI AND FLIGHTS TO NICARAGUA

Source: DHS and Flightaware.



Encounters, Apprehensions, Detention, and Expulsion: Migrants and the Notice to Appear

Not all migrants arriving at the US border are released but rather are processed upon determination of the border official about the status of the person. Those who claim seeking asylum and fear of returning to their home country may be considered inadmissible but given a day in court with a notice to appear. These notices represented more than 300,000 between January and July 2023. That’s 30 percent of all inadmissible migrants in 2023.⁶

TABLE 3: IRREGULAR ARRIVALS BY TYPE OF ENCOUNTERS, FY2020-FY2023

Source: DHS, nationwide-encounters, FY20-FY23-Aug

Country	Apprehensions	Expulsions	Inadmissibles	Grand Total
Brazil	126,515	8,356	18,611	153,482
Canada	328	6,459	124,195	130,982
China, Peoples Republic of	23,674	2,485	88,900	115,059
Colombia	247,469	26,560	23,179	297,208
Cuba	371,336	20,970	70,262	462,568
Ecuador	158,591	72,512	5,594	236,697
El Salvador	113,171	140,172	16,735	270,078
Guatemala	330,807	406,248	16,894	753,949
Haiti	60,700	23,669	171,669	256,038
Honduras	334,745	372,987	60,155	767,887
India	61,437	10,527	130,724	202,688
Mexico	429,447	1,783,504	274,901	2,487,852
Myanmar (Burma)	8	10	15,191	15,209
Nicaragua	301,248	10,885	38,184	350,317
Other	202,320	27,402	284,297	514,019
Peru	119,975	4,824	9,258	134,057
Philippines	50	810	193,572	194,432
Romania	12,589	425	4,449	17,463
Russia	12,914	383	96,417	109,714
Turkey	31,370	252	13,243	44,865
Ukraine	720	608	206,986	208,314
Venezuela	342,979	40,903	123,290	507,172
Grand Total	3,282,393	2,960,951	1,986,706	8,230,050

Moreover, not all are released into US territory. But a sizeable number could be 60 percent of all encounters. Taking expulsions apart, which include 2.9 million, all family units and unaccompanied minors (2.15 million) are typically released. Among single arriving irregular migrants, there are different treatments depending on the nationalities, for more possible lenience to countries from Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua than Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, to a number that could total 2.3 million releases of single adults, many of which claim to seek asylum and may receive a notice to appear.⁷ The implications as to the magnitude are important because the case load of removal officers has more than doubled from 2018 to 2023, the number of case officers has not changed.⁸

The Composition of Migration

Aside from the size, the kind of migrant arriving exhibits a different composition. Migration is no longer shaped by single, Mexican males – the trend in the 1990s. There is a significant change in the type of nationality arriving.

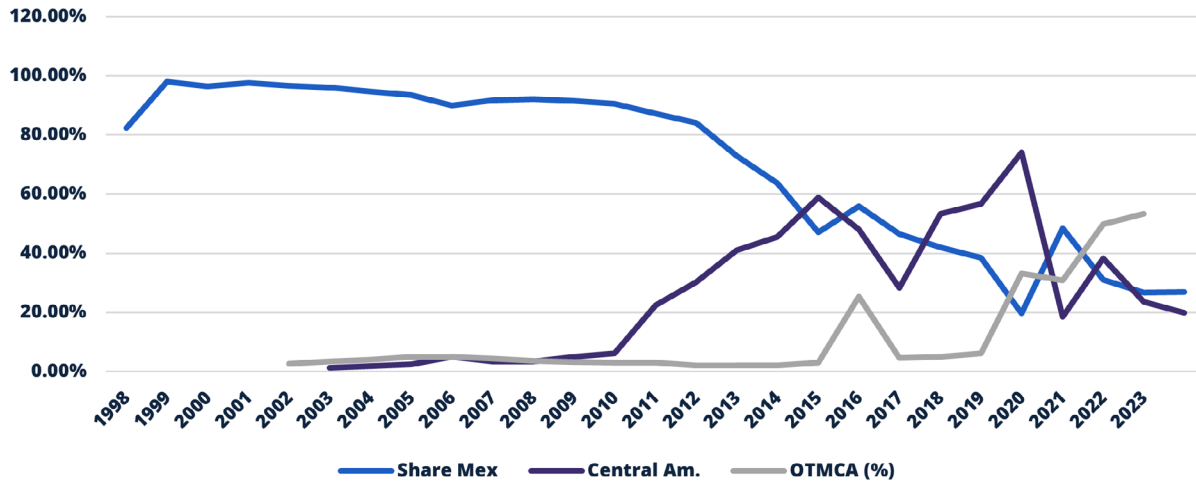
This inflow to the United States is composed of migrants from Mexico, Central America – with significant increases from Nicaragua, and Ecuador, as well as refugees from Venezuela, Cuba, and Haiti. But in the last three years since 2020, another change in the composition of nationalities took place shaped by the arrival of people from third countries or extra-continen-

tals.

Mexican and Central American migration continued but accompanied by a wider, larger number of nationalities from the region and outside the continent. Over half of this migration is coming from countries other than Mexico and Central America; they include Russian and Ukrainian nationalities.

GRAPH 5: ENCOUNTERS AT THE US BORDER WITH MEXICO, 1998-2023

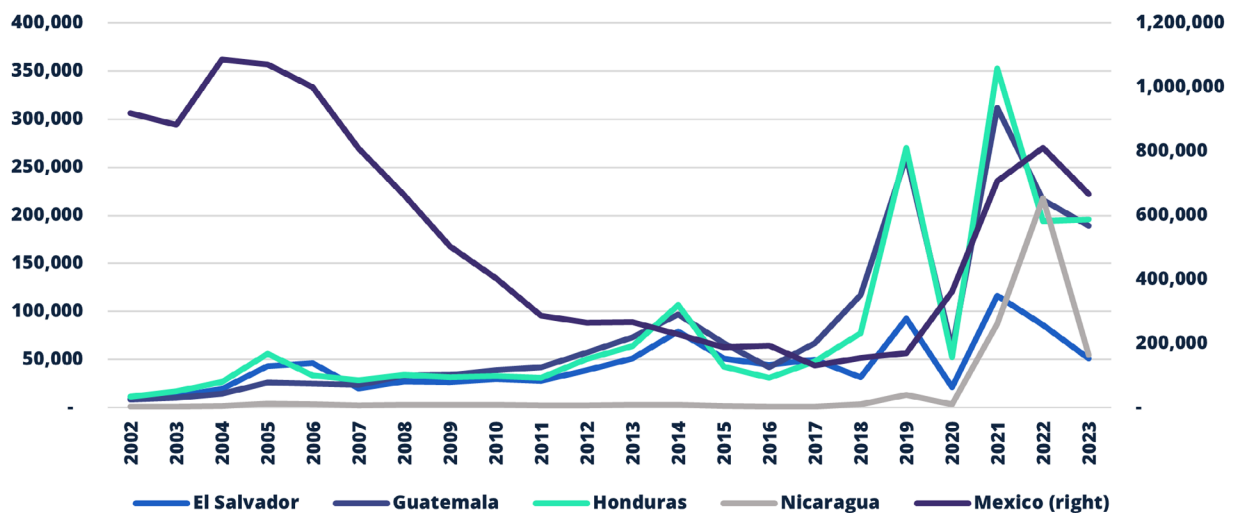
Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters. OTMCA: Other than Mexico and Central America



The chart above does not imply that Mexican and Central American migration are declining rather that other countries are changing the relative weight of these region in terms of migration. Central American migrants are leaving their homelands in large numbers. Combined from 2019 to 2023, Central American migrants may represent annually two percent of their homeland population.

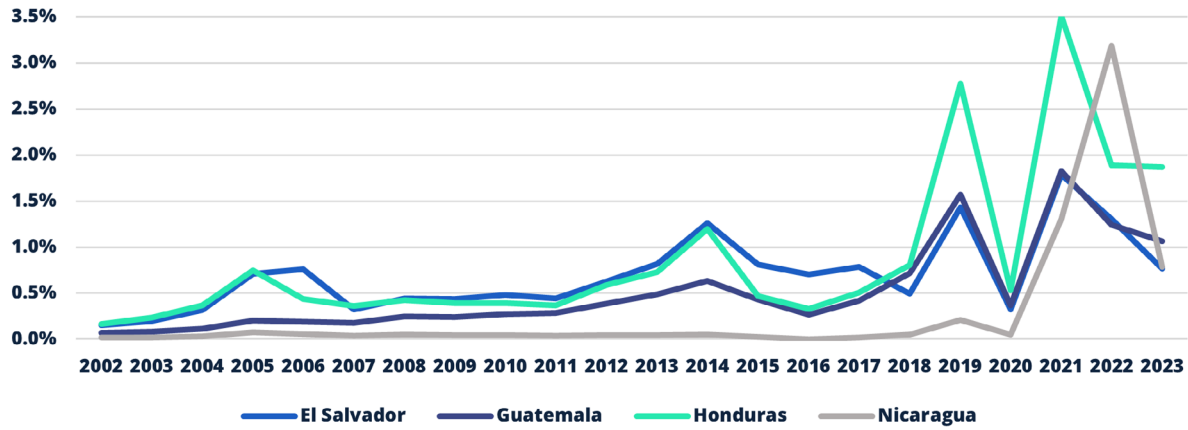
GRAPH 6: ENCOUNTERS AT US-MEXICO BORDER: MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA, 2002-2023

Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters.



GRAPH 7: CENTRAL AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS AS A SHARE OF THEIR COUNTRY'S POPULATION, 2002-2023

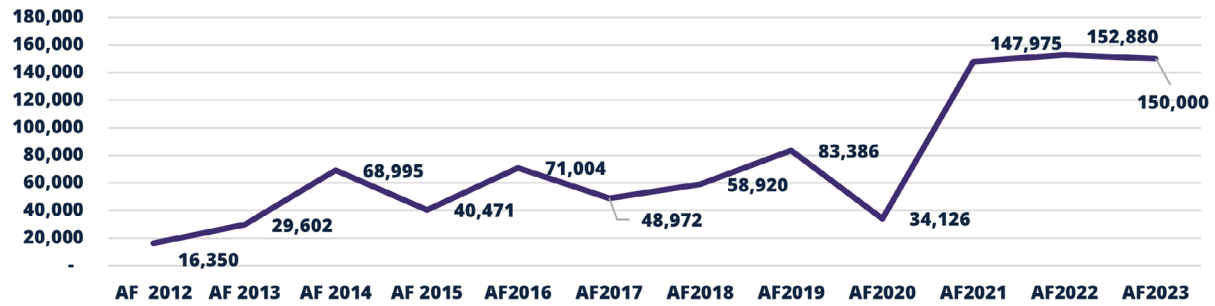
Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters.



The demographic composition of migration has also changed: people on the move are half adults, and half families and unaccompanied children: five percent of all migrants entering the US in 2023 are unaccompanied minors. More kids are leaving every year than the annual increment of matriculation in high school in Central America. In fact, Guatemala's matriculation has been declining since 2018.

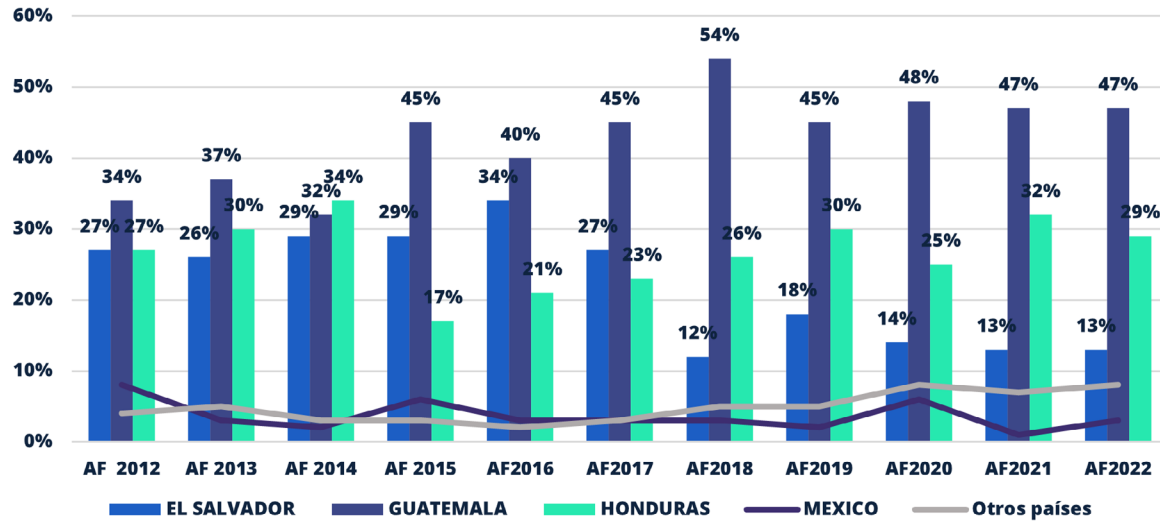
GRAPH 8: UNACCOMPANIED MINORS BY FISCAL YEAR

Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters.



GRAPH 9: UAC FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters.



Relative to all migrants, there is a shift in the composition of migration apart from unaccompanied minors. The number of family groups from all arrivals increases from 12 percent to 35 percent between August 2020 and August 2023. However, among Central Americans the number increases from 34 percent to 56 percent: encounters of single adults were 44 percent in August 2023.

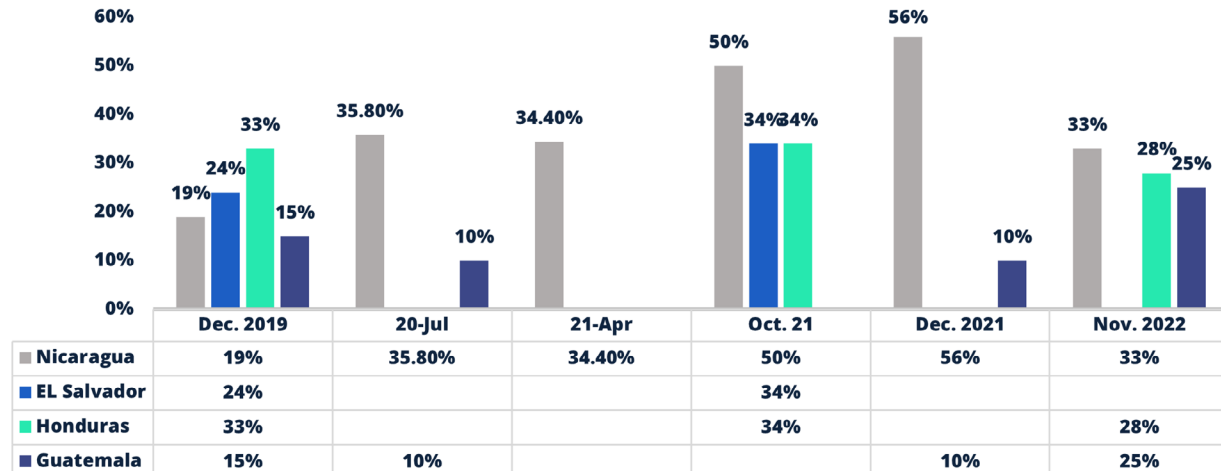
The Nature of Migration

The factors explaining current migration are more complex and include political crises, economic insecurity, violence, weak social protection systems, COVID-19 contagion, low vaccination rates, and natural disasters. It is difficult to pinpoint migration to one single indicator. Overall, aspirational or poor material conditions in the homeland is an important common denominator, manifested economically or politically.

There is one important feature of recent migration is that the size of it is supported by the intention to migrate itself. Central American migrants' intention to migrate, for example, has increased or remained above a fourth of all households.

GRAPH 10: INTENTION TO MIGRATE, 2019-2023

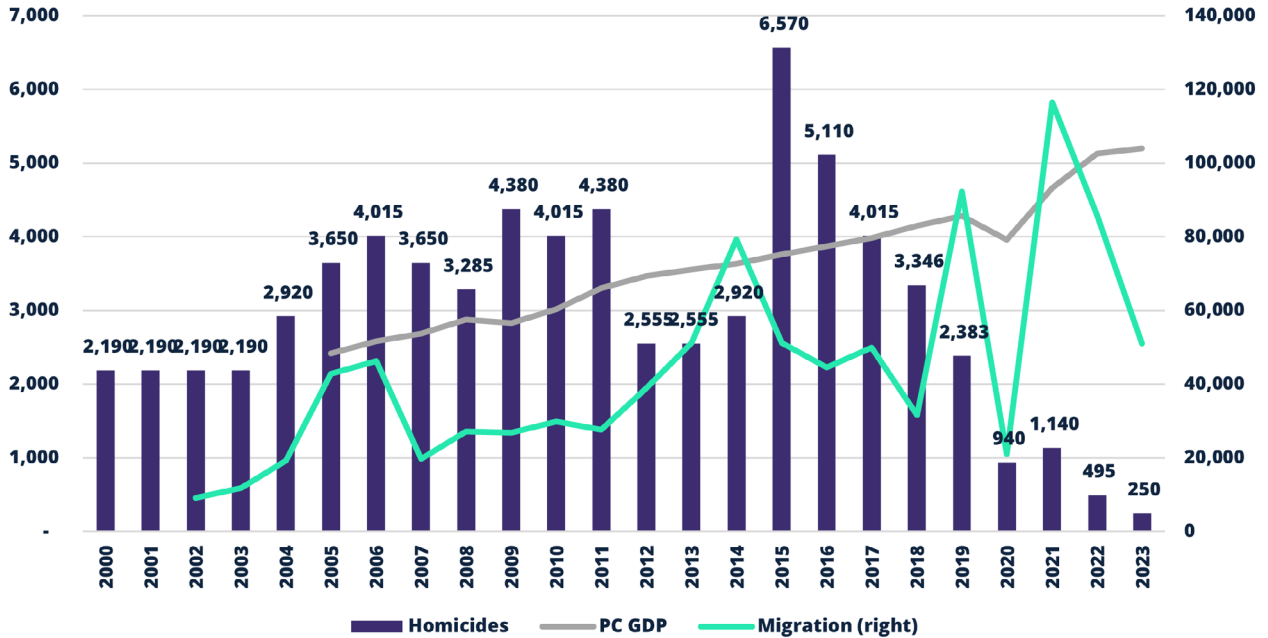
Source: Several author surveys. See Orozco, Manuel. Centroamérica dinámicas migratorias – CAP 2022-2023, Sesión 13



For example, Salvadoran migration continues to occur despite the drastic measures to contain crime in that country. If anything, the number of people migrating during the presidency of Nayib Bukele is higher than his predecessors. Moreover, research suggests that the intention to migrate increases when Salvadorans are unhappy with Bukele’s concentration of power.

GRAPH 11: EL SALVADOR, HOMICIDES, MIGRATION AND PERSONAL INCOME

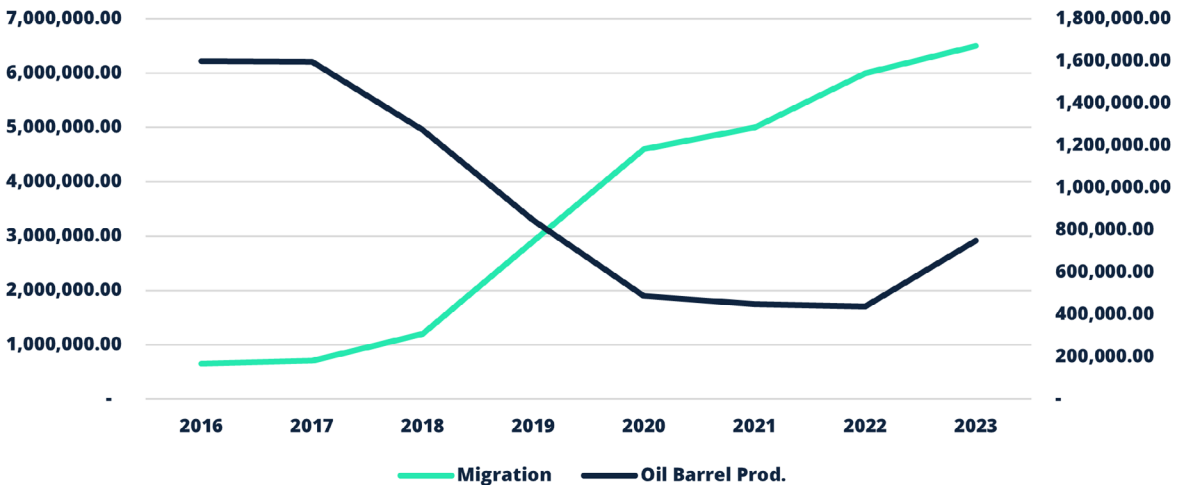
Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters. Police reports and World Bank Development Indicators



The nationalities with higher migration inflows are those coming from more politically unstable or repressive countries, like Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. For example, Venezuelan migration increases significantly since 2016 coinciding with the economic disaster following expropriations and subsequent currency controls reaching 6.5 million migrants this year, up from 1.2 million in 2018.⁹ Other underlying factors also influenced the exodus, particularly the worsening political situation.

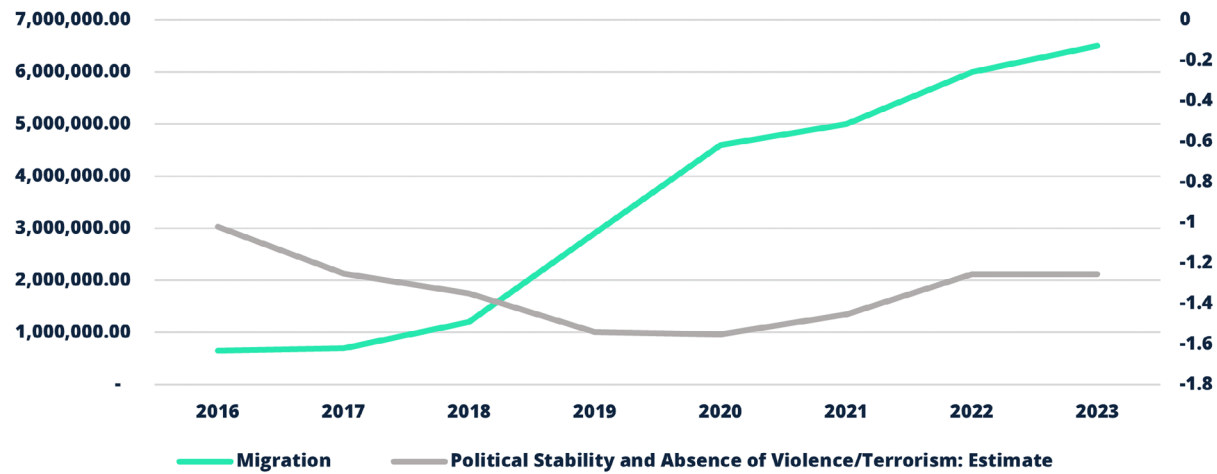
GRAPH 12: MIGRATION AND OIL PRODUCTION, 2016-2023

Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters; World Bank Governance Indicators.



GRAPH 13: MIGRATION AND INCREASED POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN VENEZUELA

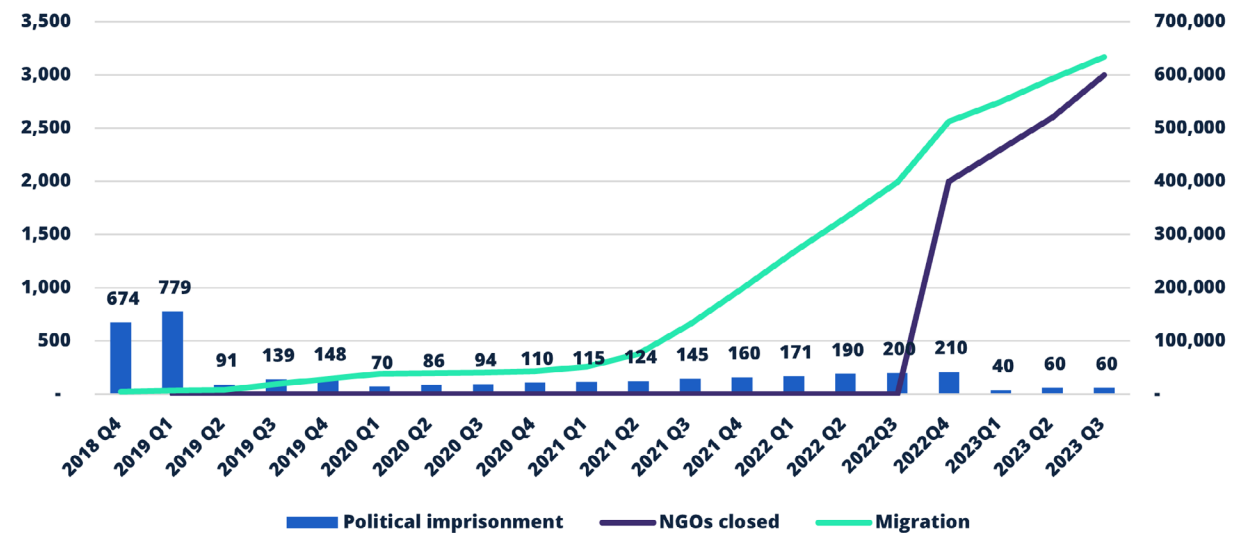
Source: DHS, Nationwide Encounters. Police reports and World Bank Development Indicators



The migration of Nicaraguans has also coincided with the rapid repression that escalated in 2018 and has reached some of the worst levels in the Americas. The number of Nicaraguans exiting their home country increased with the imprisonment of civic leaders, the attacks on religious faith leaders, and expropriation of legal status of businesses and nonprofit organizations.

GRAPH 14: REPRESSION IN NICARAGUA AND MIGRATION

Source: Orozco, Manuel. [Dictatorial Radicalization](#)



In fact, countries like Russia, Ukraine, Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Cuba went up from six percent to 30 percent of all encounters between 2020 and 2023. In addition to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, which also exhibit serious problems in political stability, the political dimension of migration is simply undeniable.

Economic Impact Amid Crises

The economic impact of these flows is now five percent of Latin America and the Caribbean’s national income. This translates into 45 million migrants and 90 percent are integrating a hemisphere wide labor force and ten percent migrant minors with educational needs. Of those, 60

percent are in the United States. There are at least 30 million remittance senders connecting household to household home economics. Each migrant typically performs more than 14 transfers of small dollar denominated amounts to their families. In total, 80 percent of remittance flows originates from the United States.

Half of migrants live in 20 largest cities in the Americas: Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Santiago (Chile), San Jose (Costa Rica), Bogota (Colombia), Santo Domingo (DR), Sao Paulo (Brazil), and border cities like Upala, Tecun Uman, Nuevo

TABLE 4: TRANSNATIONAL ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, 2022

Source: Orozco, Manuel. Author estimates.

Region	Senders	Volume	Nostalgic Trade	Households with Migrants	Remittances as Percent of GDP
South America	8,451,583.64	26,866,510,755.00	11,156,090,401	30%	15%
Mexico	9,595,993	58,497,102,400	12,666,711,095	25%	4%
Central America	6,337,961.85	39,639,052,607.00	8,366,109,638	40%	24%
Caribbean	4,613,696.5	20,588,979,059.0	6,090,079,357	60%	20%
<i>LAC</i>	28,999,235.22	145,591,644,821.00	38,278,990,493	25%	5%

Laredo, Cucuta, Colombia operating as connecting hubs of mobility, and homes. There are more than 100 corporations performing remittance origination services, but 20 control the US outbound market. Over 1,000 financial institutions, two thirds of which are banks, with a payment network of more than six million payment points territorially connect the Americas on real time transactions. At least ten agro-export, businesses in every country are providing nostalgic trade services plus hundreds of producers integrated to a transnational value chain. Although most migrants are in irregular status, a minimum of 20 percent of migrants visit their homeland every year, spending US\$1,000 per stay.

TABLE 5: GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN MIGRANTS

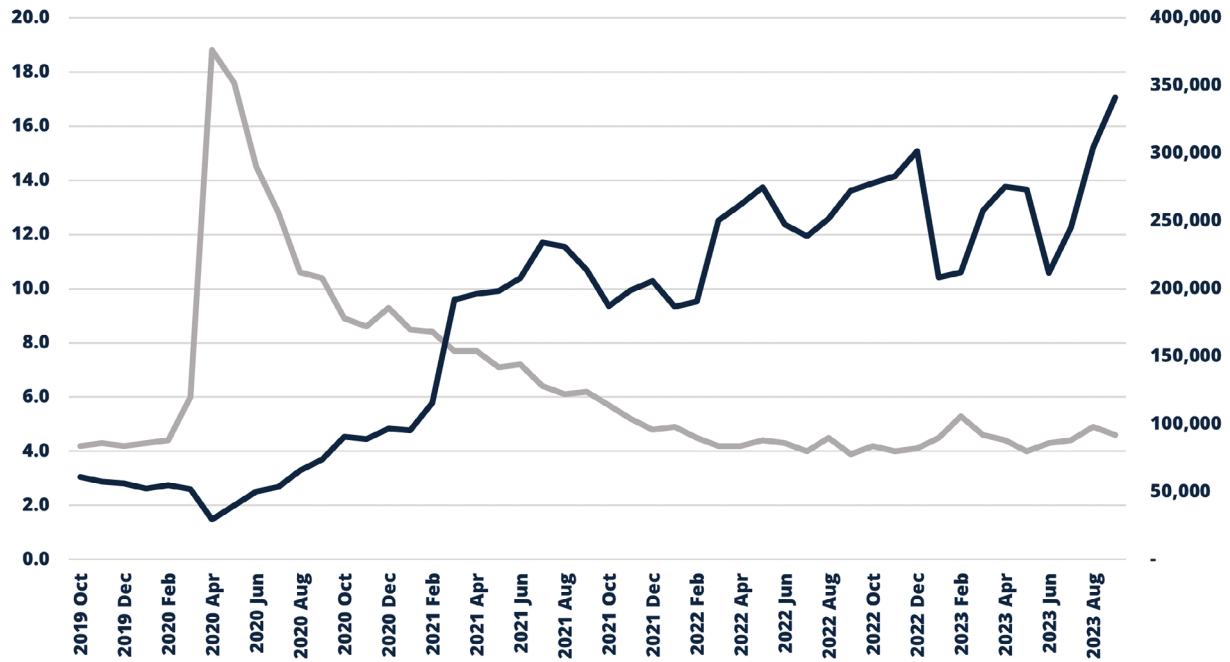
Source: UNDESA and Country official statistics.

Origin \ Destination	United States	Canada	Europe	Latin America and the Caribbean	Other	World
Caribbean	16%	1%	2%	3%	0%	22%
Central America	39%	0%	1%	2%	0%	42%
South America	9%	1%	10%	25%	1%	46%
<i>LAC</i>	60%	2%	13%	26%	2%	100%

It is important to point out that the health of the US economy has contributed to pulling migrants into the US. The number of migrants increased with the declining unemployment rate during the third quarter of 2020 and onwards.

GRAPH 15: US UNEMPLOYMENT AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION TO THE US-MEXICO BORDER, 2019-2023

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Finally, it is worth pointing out that since this migration crisis took place, the most fragile states migrant sending countries have become greatly dependent on family remittances, a situation pointing to the economic conditions in those states, and also to what could seem to be a perversity in politics: expelling citizens to get them to remit to families.

TABLE 6: FAMILY REMITTANCES TO LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, 1990-2023

Source: Family Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023. IAD, Washington, DC.

País	1990	2000	2010	2020	2021	2022	2023
Argentina		0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Belize		3.4	2.2	4.5	5.8	5.4	
Bolivia		0.1	1.5	4.9	3.1	3.5	3.5
Brazil		0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.3	
Colombia		1.0	1.6	1.4	2.6	2.7	2.8
Costa Rica		0.2	0.9	1.4	0.8	0.9	1.0
Dominican Republic		4.5	7.6	7.2	10.6	11.4	10.3
Ecuador		0.3	7.2	3.7	3.4	4.1	4.2
El Salvador		7.6	15.0	18.8	24.1	26.1	26.7
Guatemala		1.6	3.1	10.4	14.7	17.9	20.0
Guyana	..		3.8	10.7	7.8	6.8	6.8
Haiti	..		8.5	12.4	23.8	20.0	17
Honduras		1.3	6.6	16.5	23.5	25.3	28.8
Jamaica		5.0	9.7	15.3	22.2	25.3	25.6
Mexico		1.2	1.1	2.1	3.9	4.3	4.6
Nicaragua	..		6.3	9.4	14.7	15.3	22.2
Panama		1.7	0.1	1.4	0.8	0.9	0.9
Paraguay		0.6	1.7	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.3
Peru		0.3	1.4	1.7	1.5	1.6	1.7
Suriname		0.1	0.1	0.1	4.3	4.9	4.9
Trinidad and Tobago		0.1	0.5	0.4	0.9	1.0	1.0
Uruguay	0.3		0.2	0.2	0.2
Venezuela, RB		0.0	0.0	0.0	5.3

Government Policy

Since the Los Angeles Declaration of May 2022, the already prevailing migration crisis, worsened to more complicated conditions. How have governments and countries responded to this crisis? Governments have made efforts to address this crisis by opening legal pathways, engaging in deterrence measures, and providing humanitarian and development assistance. The multilateral recognition at the Summit of the Americas was an important step in that direction. However, the flow has continued. Below is a short look at how governments in the region have been responding to the current situation.

United States

Since the adoption of the Los Angeles declaration, the Biden administration has experimented with policy solutions to expand legal migratory pathways to those traveling to the US. As part of the US's efforts to reduce the economic drivers of migration, the administration inaugurated the "Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity" to help foster commerce and investment in the Americas.¹⁰ Just over one year ago, the US announced its new "humanitarian parole" pathway to those migrating from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.¹¹ Over 160,000 migrants have

traveled legally through this program as of June 2023. On April 27, 2023, the US announced its plans to open "Safe Mobility Offices" throughout the region to connect would-be migrants in transit with legal pathways to reaching the US. Despite a bumpy debut, the program has established processing centers in Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador and is offering the chance for migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Colombia (depending on the center)¹² safe and legal pathways to the US, Spain, and Canada. This has been achieved in conjunction with the US-led "Resettlement Diplomacy Network" (RDN) that includes the participation of European partners, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.^{13,14}

Since the sunset of Title 42 enforcement, the Biden administration has faced challenges from Republican lawmakers and attorneys general in their efforts to expand legal migratory pathways. The most recent of which challenges the "catch and release" loophole under Title 8 enforcement that allows the US government to release migrants deemed inadmissible with the condition they appear before court for legal procedures.¹⁵

In addition to these programs, the US has committed resources for humanitarian and development assistance to South and Central America to assist migrants and prevent the need to migrate. The Biden administration

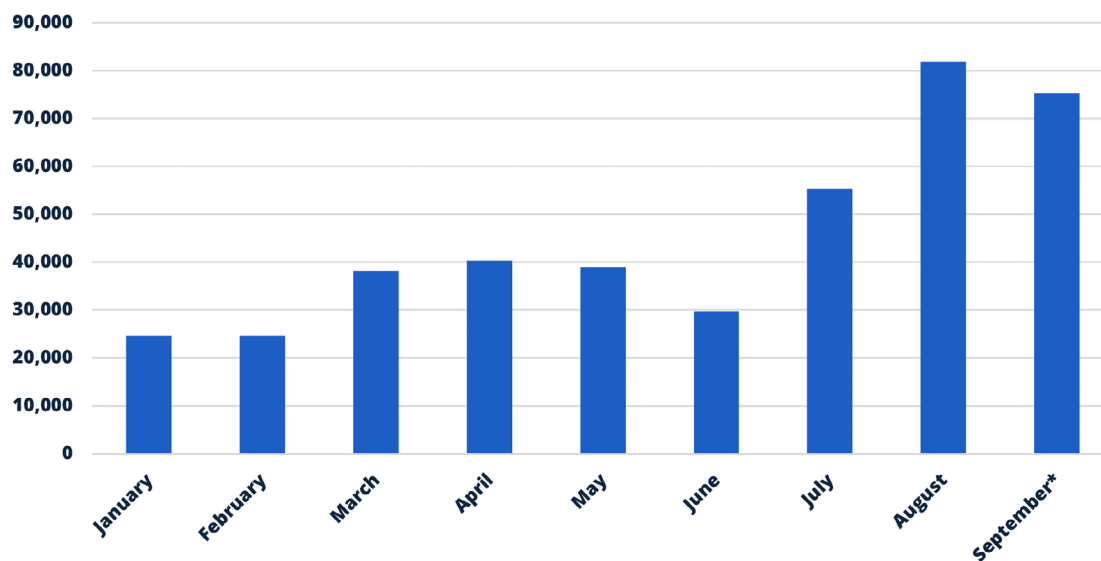
has been lobbying Congress for additional resources¹⁶ yet has lamented the lack of congressional response.¹⁷ For now, the administration's policy is focusing heavily on countering human trafficking by transnational criminal organizations by expanding legal pathways through humanitarian and work visas¹⁸ while simultaneously reinforcing migrant reception capacities¹⁹ and deterrence efforts.²⁰

Panama and Costa Rica

Meanwhile the governments of Panama and Costa Rica have been responding to the continuity of migrants in transit arriving at their borders seeking refuge or asylum. Recording the arrival of at least 400,000 arrivals from the Darien jungle this year, Panamanian officials have expanded the scope of their "Operation Controlled Flow" strategy from 2015 that seeks to limit migrant entrance into the country from border towns.²¹ The government has tightened entrance requirements and accelerated deportations of those entering with criminal records.²² At the same time, the government is partnering with their Costa Rican counterparts to expand the number of bus routes available to shuttle migrants from southern border towns to northern ones.²³ Since February, Panamanian officials have been engaging in increased cooperation with the government of Colombia to better manage flows in the Darien jungle, however talks have been showing signs of friction.²⁴

GRAPH 16: MIGRANTS WHO CROSSED THE DARIEN JUNGLE IN 2023

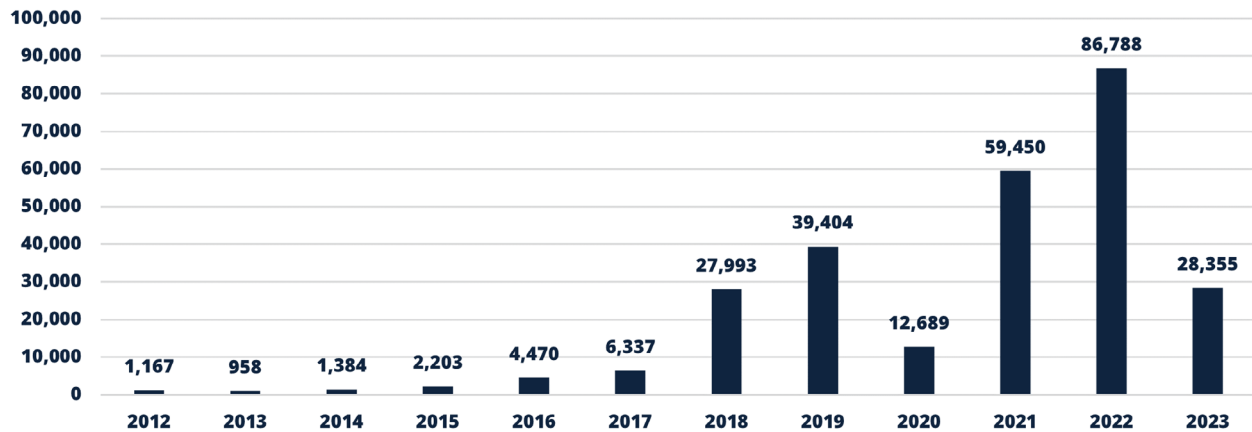
Source: Datos Abiertos de Panamá, Government of Panama. <https://www.datosabiertos.gob.pa/>



In response to large numbers of migrants in 2022, Costa Rica announced two decrees to reform its immigration system to regularize the status of migrants in the country.²⁵ The first decree adjusts the current work permit program, updates the current application process, and stipulates that if migrants choose to leave the country that their refugee processes will be abandoned. The second offers Cuban, Venezuelan, and Nicaraguan migrants in the country temporary protected status for two years starting March 1, 2023, so long as they do not have a criminal record and renounce refugee status applications. Last month, Pres. Chaves Robles of Costa Rica, declared a state of emergency²⁶ which allows the government to access additional resources to confront the crisis. In addition to expanding the number of buses available to migrants to traverse the country, the government intends to expand holding centers to segregate migrants from the local population. In recent days, Costa Rica has seen between 2,500 and 3,000 migrants arrive at the Panamanian border each day.²⁷

GRAPH 17: REFUGEE CLAIMS, COSTA RICA, 2012-2023

Source: Unidad de Refugio, September 22, 2023



Subnational Government

Municipalities across Central and South America are also feeling the effects of increased migration within their towns and often do not have the same resources at their disposal to attend to the crisis. A large issue they are currently coping with is a lack of resources – specifically medical supplies. In the town of Danli, Honduras, doctors are overwhelmed by the number of patients seeking care²⁸ while doctors in Bajo Chiquito, Panama are facing the added crisis of medicine shortages.²⁹ The State of Chiapas in Mexico and towns bordering the Darien jungle in Colombia have seen increased presence of criminal organizations seeking to profit from trafficking.^{30,31} Due to resource scarcity, other communities such as Canaan Membrillo, Panama and Paso Canoas, Costa Rica³² have been struggling to provide basic humanitarian services to those arriving which has caused tensions with local populations.

Intraregional Initiatives

On October 22, the government of Mexico convened a group of nine countries from Latin America and the Caribbean to Palenque, Mexico – a transit city. With the exclusion of the United States³³ the meeting served as a forum for leaders in the region to compare notes and prepare a unified stance to present to the US and other destination countries. Mexican government along with 11 other signatories, announced a 14-point agreement³⁴ outlining their vision for responding to the crisis. The points echo parts of the Los Angeles Declaration which call for increased cooperation and coordination between states, addressing structural issues that cause migrations, and the protection of migrant rights throughout the region.

However, many of the premises stated in this declaration are incomplete and untrue. For example, the point about coercive (ie., sanctions) measures as a causal factor of migration is a gross inaccuracy and exaggerated statement. Sanctions have no correlation with migration. Second, the document makes no reference to protecting the rights of people from migrating, ignoring conditions that have led people to leave, particularly for Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Additionally, in recent days, representatives from eight countries in the Mercado Común del Sur (Mercosur) and la Comunidad Andina (CAN) met in La Paz, Bolivia to discuss measures to address the crisis as a region. The group strategized on issues such as border management, protection of the rights of marginalized groups in transit, and harmonizing irregular migration policies.³⁵ While the majority of Mercosur and CAN countries have reacted to the flows of largely Venezuelan migrants in recent years with anxiety and protective measures, Brazil has benefited economically from a new workforce within its borders.³⁶

Since 2018, Brazil has “interiorized” migrants – who arrive primarily in the State of Roraima – to other parts of the country through the program “Operation Welcome” and over 90 percent of Venezuelans in Brazil now have legal status.³⁷ Despite receiving a proportionally smaller number of migrants, the program has helped reduce local tensions with migrant populations and has managed to maintain broad political support.

The Los Angeles Declaration in a way has become a distant goal thanks to the large arrival and transit of migrants. It seems that, invariably, the policy response has mostly been that of treating this crisis as a humanitarian issue. In

that sense, while the Declaration has not been abandoned, the question as to what to prioritize remains. Another issue of relevance is that if the large migrant crisis is a consequence of political instability, deterioration, or worsening rule of law from countries that are expelling their populations through repression, why are countries not responding more through foreign policy to tackle the situation?

PAIRING MIGRATION WITH FOREIGN POLICY

The management of this crisis involves treating the multidimensional components of it proportionally and symmetrically. This includes:

A

Addressing the effects of the inflow on migrants during the trek, from a humanitarian perspective, as well as the case management upon presenting to borders under the asylum and refugee context

B

Addressing the root causes of migration as a matter of foreign policy holding countries accountable for the emigration and providing cooperative arrangements to mitigate further migration³⁸

C

Establishing a development and democratization strategy in a multilateral context in order to share responsibility among all countries that have migration and receive migrants

Most countries have worked on (a), albeit imperfectly, and are making efforts to mitigate the effects of the inflow. The main challenge is that these efforts are made with the national interest to secure their borders in mind, followed by a humanitarian philosophy. However, these host countries are not touching on the root causes and ways to mitigate further migration. Peoples' decisions to migrate are tied to their homeland political conditions, and without a foreign policy approach, migration will hardly recede in the midterm.

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