



Research on Child Migration and Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Understanding Evidence and Exploring Gaps¹

Workshop background paper

‘Child Migration and Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean:
Aligning Evidence-based Solutions and Research Priorities’,
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Girl migrating through Colombia toward the Darien Gap
Credit UNICEF

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Introduction

Although migration has been a longstanding fact of life in Latin America and the Caribbean, the number of children affected by migration, including both children migrating and residing in host communities, is increasing. UNICEF estimates that 3.5 million children will be affected by migration in the Latin America and the Caribbean Region (LAC) in 2022, an estimated increase of 47% over 2021.² Significant research has been done around the world to ensure a better understanding of what drives migration, what challenges migrants face and mechanisms for addressing these. And yet, that research has often failed to fully address the needs or experiences of children. Children are very often seen as mere extensions of their parents, without independent perspective or capacity for action. This assumption, however, is increasingly challenged by the visible reality of children travelling unaccompanied.

Even where their needs are considered, too often their own perspectives are ignored. However, the little research that has been carried out with children shows that they do have agency. Research by Save the Children shows that children can and do make decisions about whether to migrate or stay based on “very deliberate, carefully considered reasoning.”³ Understanding these decision-making strategies, and their needs and perspectives is critical to designing interventions that best support children.

Understandings of migration are also challenged by the reality that patterns of migration are changing quickly, and that evidence and programming are not always linked. COVID-19 has exacerbated patterns of dislocation and poverty that were already driving migration in the region and increasing climate shocks are creating new migration patterns and dynamics. These dynamics create new urgency to assess the existing evidence base and the extent to which knowledge generation is utilised (or not) to develop effective programming and policy, and to identify information gaps that hinder the design and implementation of appropriate policies and programmes. Alongside this, in some contexts, existing information may not be effectively shared or appropriately analysed to allow it to be best applied to policy. In still other situations, other interest and dynamics may impede the implementation of lessons learned from research and analysis.

Paper Background and Key Objectives

Given these needs and gaps, the University of Virginia’s (UVA’s) [Democracy Initiative](#) (DI) and [Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy](#)’s [Global Policy Centre](#) (GPC) and UNICEF Innocenti are convening a two day conference to discuss these issues. The conference, “Research on Child Migration and Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Aligning

² UNICEF, “Latin America and the Caribbean: About 3.5 million children to be affected by migration next year – UNICEF,” 3 December 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/latin-america-and-caribbean-about-3.5-million-children-to-be-affected-by-migration-next-year>

³ Save the Children, “Why Children Stay,” 2018, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/why_children_stay.pdf/

Evidence-based Solutions and Research Priorities’,” will convene a selection of leading academic experts, child migration practitioners, civil society organizations, and regional governments to discuss the state of qualitative and quantitative evidence related to child and family displacement and migration in the LAC region. The meeting will focus on consolidating evidence on solutions, identifying further evidence needs and priorities, and facilitating opportunities for knowledge partnerships around evidence-generation and action between academia, research organizations, and UNICEF.

This paper is intended to provide a framework for the workshop. It builds directly on two extensive reviews of available evidence on solutions conducted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on behalf of UNICEF. These include a regional perspective on solutions, [‘Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean: Review of Evidence’](#) (2023), led by UNICEF’s Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (UNICEF LACRO), and a global perspective offered by the earlier publication [“Rapid Evidence Assessment: What Works to Protect Children on the Move”](#) (2020), led by UNICEF Innocenti Global Office of Research and Foresight (Innocenti) in collaboration with ILO, IOM and UNHCR.

At the same time, the following paper also highlight key gaps in evidence with a view to illustrating the nature of these gaps and considering how collaboration among actors in research, academia, and practice can contribute to solutions. In particular, we focus on the access of children to documentation and legal identity, model of care for children on the move, and the extent to which data is available, and comparable across the region.

Overview of Paper

This paper is structured around the migration journey. It begins with an overview of key migration movement patterns, then moves on to key drivers of migration. The paper then discusses key risks that children face on their journeys (including trafficking and smuggling, child protection risks and lack of access to services) and the extent to which existing systems are able to respond to these challenges. It goes on to discuss challenges in the destination country. Throughout, the unique challenges facing children are discussed, and where possible a gender perspective is included. The extent of, or gaps in, evidence and analytical innovations are also addressed.

[Regional context: What are key migration pathways in the region?](#)

Migration patterns and dynamics across the region are diverse. The three largest and best documented are outward from Venezuela to Colombia and then onward to other parts of South America, from and through Central America and Mexico, and outward from Haiti. Less well documented but also significant are internal displacement and regional migration within both South and Central America. The following sections provide brief overviews of key migration trends, particularly relating to children, in the region. It provides more detailed information for areas of central discussion at the conference, such as the Darien Gap.

Venezuela

An estimated 7.13 million people have left Venezuela in recent years,⁴ and at least 5.99 million of whom are registered as refugees elsewhere in South America. Although the largest number of Venezuelans (2.48 million) have gone to neighbouring Colombia, increasing numbers are migrating further South. Peru now hosts 1.49 million Venezuelans and others are heading further south to Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina, or east to Brazil.⁵

In recent years, the number of children among this population has increased.⁶ This may be a result of parents having migrated in earlier waves seeking to reunite with children, or this also may be because now whole families are moving. We do not have specific figures on the proportion, but a 2019 study showed that family reunification was the most important reason for children leaving Venezuela.⁷

Central American and Mexico

Another major corridor of migration in the region runs from Central America, through Mexico to the United States (US). The numbers using this corridor have increased steadily since 2011.⁸ In FY21, US Border Patrol encountered nearly 684,000 individuals from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala at the border.⁹ The number of Mexicans joining the flow is increasing, with the number of Mexicans apprehended along the border increasing 50% between 2019 and 2020 and reversing a decade long trend of decreasing migration from Mexico to the US.¹⁰

The US has traditionally been the dominant destination for migrants from across the LAC region and Mexican and Central Americans in particular. In 2020, IOM called the dominance of the US as a destination the “most striking feature of the main migration corridors” in the LAC region.¹¹

⁴ UNHCR, “Children on the move in Latin America and the Caribbean: Review of evidence,” <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/40966/file/Children-on-the-move-in-LAC.pdf>

⁵ UNHCR, “Children on the move in Latin America and the Caribbean: Review of evidence,” <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/40966/file/Children-on-the-move-in-LAC.pdf>

⁶ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, “Children on the move in Latin America and the Caribbean: Review of evidence,” June 2022 p. 37.

⁷ OVM – Observatorio Venezolano de Migración. 2021. Participación de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el proceso migratorio Venezolano. Caracas: OVM.

⁸ The University of Edinburgh and UNICEF, “Violence against children in Latin America and the Caribbean 2015-2021: A systematic review,” October 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34481/file/Violence-against-children-full-report.pdf>

⁹ Congressional Research Service, “Central American Migration: Root Causes and US Policy,” 31 March 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

¹⁰ Lopez, Oscar and Maria Abi-Habib, “Ending a Decade Long Decline, More Mexicans are Migrating to the United States,” *New York Times*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/world/americas/migrants-mexico-texas.html>

¹¹ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf.

Children form a significant portion of this population. In FY21, 17% of Central Americans encountered by US border authorities were unaccompanied minors. Children are uniquely vulnerable to the gang violence and poverty that drive movement from the region.¹²

Haitian migration

Another significant migration pattern is outward from Haiti to destinations throughout the region. Haiti is the poorest country in LAC, and it has suffered from gang violence and political instability. In 2021 alone, the country's prime minister was assassinated, and a 7.2 earthquake struck. As of 2020, an estimated 1.7 million Haitians had migrated.¹³ The largest numbers travel to the US or the neighbouring Dominican Republic, but others move south to Brazil and Chile. In addition, deteriorating economies, the impact of COVID and rising xenophobia have reportedly pushed increasing numbers of Haitian to leave Brazil and Chile to move back northward towards Mexico and the US.¹⁴ Precise numbers of children in the population are not available, but in 2021, IOM statistics indicated that 18.7 percent of Haitian migrants returned from the United States were children, indicating that they make up a significant portion of the population.¹⁵ A significant number of children in this population were born abroad and may not have the same nationality as their parents.¹⁶

Intra-regional migration

Migration within the region is also significant. IOM reports that within South America, a large majority of migrants move within the sub-region, including, for example, from Paraguay and Bolivia to Argentina, Chile and Brazil.¹⁷ Mexico is increasingly becoming a destination for Central Americans and others.¹⁸ Within Central America people from Panama and Nicaragua to Costa Rica and from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to Belize.¹⁹ The numbers of African and other extra-regional migrants moving through the region are increasing.²⁰

¹² Congressional Research Service, "Central American Migration: Root Causes and US Policy," 31 March 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

¹³ Caitlyn Yates, "Haitian Migration through the Americas: A Decade in the Making," *Migration Policy Institute*, 30 September 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-migration-through-americas>

¹⁴ Caitlyn Yates, "Haitian Migration through the Americas: A Decade in the Making," *Migration Policy Institute*, 30 September 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-migration-through-americas>

¹⁵ UNICEF, "Nearly 170 children expelled back to Haiti from the US and Cuba in one day," 11 October 2021.

¹⁶ Caitlyn Yates, "Haitian Migration through the Americas: A Decade in the Making," *Migration Policy Institute*, 30 September 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-migration-through-americas>

¹⁷ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf; Migration Data Portal, "Migration data in South America," 26 October 2021,

<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/migration-data-south-america>

¹⁸ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf.

¹⁹ The University of Edinburgh and UNICEF, "Violence against children in Latin America and the Caribbean 2015-2021: A systematic review," October 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34481/file/Violence-against-children-full-report.pdf>

²⁰ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf

Internal Displacement

There are also significant patterns of internal displacement in the region, most prominently in Colombia where the FARC dissidents and associated insecurity displaced millions. Although the signing of the 2016 peace agreement has improved security in the country, fighting with non-signatory armed groups and other insecurity has led to continued displacement. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) more than five million Colombians remain displaced,²¹ including 709,211 who have been displaced since 2016.²² Other significant areas of internal displacement according to IDMC are El Salvador (175,000), Honduras (247,000), Guatemala (243,000) and Mexico (379,000).²³ Internal displacement, however, tends to be less well documented than international movements and counts vary significantly. For example, the Salvadoran government estimates that only about 71,500 were displaced between 2006 and 2016,²⁴ significantly lower than IDMC's estimate (175,000).

Enough attention has not been put to the truth that the extent of internal displacement is much greater than that of international. Information about the situation of internally displaced children is far less available than it is for migrant or refugee children.²⁵ In many cases, age disaggregated statistics are not available. However, DTM includes this information in monitoring of displacement in Haiti.²⁶ A study by IDMC in Colombia, although it did not survey the whole population, indicated that the proportion of children in displaced communities was high (49%), higher than that of the host or overall national population.²⁷

The Darien gap – one of the world's most dangerous crossings

The Darien Gap is one of the most dangerous parts of the journey for many migrants in the LAC region. It is a 100 km area filled with dense jungle and has been home to militants and drug traffickers.²⁸ These traffickers at times attack and rob migrants. Migrants may also be

²¹ IDMC dataset, "2021 Internal Displacement," available at <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>

²² UNHCR, Colombia Operational Update, January-February 2022, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/2319>

²³ IDMC dataset, "2021 Internal Displacement," available at <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>

²⁴ USAID and NRC, "Quiero mi lugar: Los derechos de vivienda, la tierra y la propiedad (VTP) de las personas afectadas por el desplazamiento en el Salvador," July 2022, <https://nrc.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Quiero-mi-lugar-versi%C3%B3n-final-SV-15082022-1.pdf>

²⁵ UNICEF, "Brief: Children affected by internal migration and displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean," forthcoming.

²⁶ See, for example, DTM, "Système d'alerte précoce pour les déplacements – Zone métropolitaine de Port-au-Prince 14-20 mai 2022," 26 May 2022, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/haiti-%E2%80%93-syst%C3%A8me-d%E2%80%99alerte-pr%C3%A9coce-pour-les-d%C3%A9placements-14-20-mai-2022>

²⁷ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Impacts of Displacement: Conflict and Violence in Quibdó and Cauca, Colombia," March 2022, https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/220302_IDMC_SocioeconomicImpacts_Colombia.pdf

²⁸ Hunter, Margaret, "Unaccompanied children crossing the Darien Gap," *Forced Migration Review* 56, October 2017.

vulnerable to wild animals, including snakes, exposure, and drowning. Children who pass through the Darien Gap are often traumatised by the experience, with some describing witnessing killings and robberies and being abandoned without access to food or water by smugglers who had lied to them about the nature of the journey.²⁹ Some describe witnessing sexual violence and suffering from lack of medical care.³⁰ Some of those who attempt the crossing have already travelled long distances and begin in a weakened state.

There has been a massive increase in the number of people crossing the Darien Gap in recent years. 248,284 crossed the Darien Gap in 2022, including 40,438 children, which was the highest yearly figure on record.³¹ Between 2021 and 2022, children constituted 20% of the migrant population, a fourfold increase in the absolute number of children crossing.³² Migrants from several countries use the passage. In 2021, about 62% were from Haiti. This shifted in the first half of 2022, with Venezuela overtaking Haiti as the main country of origin.³³ Children can be particularly vulnerable to the deprivation associated with the crossing and can become separated from their caregivers during the journey, especially when crossing rivers. Illustrating the prevalence of this risk, to provide a measure of protection, some humanitarian organisations give out child carriers to help adults to secure children to them during such crossings.³⁴

Another set of response efforts focus on ensuring appropriate reception of migrants on the Panamanian side. There is a reception centre³⁵ and migrant information is entered into a database run by SENAFRONT, the Panamanian border authorities. The data is shared with the US government as a sort of early warning of the likely number and trajectory of migrants heading towards the US³⁶ and is published on the internet.³⁷ While journalists have depicted the stories of some of these migrants,³⁸ and humanitarian actors have called for more aid to the area, there seems to be little comprehensive analysis of these migration trends over time. At

²⁹ Hunter, Margaret, "Unaccompanied children crossing the Darien Gap," *Forced Migration Review* 56, October 2017.

³⁰ MSF, "'We are tired and desperate': Stories from families who survived the Darien Gap," 17 June 2022.

³¹ UNICEF, "UNICEF Panama Humanitarian Situation Report (Children on the Move)," 10 March 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/2021-records-highest-ever-number-migrant-children-crossing-darien-jungle-towards-us#:~:text=Almost%2019%2C000%20migrant%20children%20have,below%20the%20age%20of%20five.>

³² UNICEF, "Twice more children migrating through the Panama Darien Gap this year," 17 June 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/twice-more-children-migrating-through-the-panama-darien-gap-this-year>

³³ MSF, "'We are tired and desperate': Stories from families who survived the Darien Gap," 17 June 2022.

³⁴ World Vision, "The Darien Gap: migrant route of last resort," 26 July 2022, <https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/child-protection/darien-gap-migrant-route>

³⁵ MSF, "'We are tired and desperate': Stories from families who survived the Darien Gap," 17 June 2022.

³⁶ World Vision, "The Darien Gap: migrant route of last resort," 26 July 2022, <https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/child-protection/darien-gap-migrant-route>

³⁷ See "Estadísticas," <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/inicio/estadisticas>

³⁸ See, for example, Collins, Joshua, "'The invisibles': A Cuban asylum seeker's dangerous odyssey," 10 May 2022, <https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2022/05/10/us-asylum-darien-gap-cuba-central-america-mexico/>

the same time, the government of Panama has called for stronger visa requirements in South America to staunch the flow and for US cooperation in responding to the humanitarian needs of those who do cross.³⁹

Other high-risk areas

Another area of vulnerability are *trochas*, or unofficial border points between Venezuela and neighbouring countries which are often controlled by armed and/or criminal groups. Physical and sexual violence and extortion are reported to be particularly common there.⁴⁰ Mexico is also both difficult and dangerous to cross. It is estimated that it usually takes about a month to cross Mexico. During this time, children can be vulnerable to kidnapping for ransom at the hands of gangs; the risk of physical injury from riding on *La Bestia*, a freight train commonly used by migrants where children can fall off and be seriously injured or killed, and sexual harassment or exploitation. Children may also be exposed to sexual violence across the region, including Mexico's southern states.⁴¹

Availability of Research and Documentation on Migration Pathways

Ensuring that movement is adequately documented and understood can enable appropriate responses. Knowing the number on the move, their demographic breakdown, their motivations and goals and other information, can help governments and humanitarian organizations to respond to their needs.

A wide variety of information is monitored, researched and made available. Governments often monitor numbers of border encounters and or entries and share this to varying degrees. For example, Panama monitors and releases information about the numbers of arrivals through the Darien. Other actors monitoring numbers include the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, UNHCR and the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix. These numbers are not monitored in the same way across the region. For example, DTM publishes regular updates on displacement in Haiti, but only on an ad hoc basis in Central America. Civil society organizations and journalists often carry out research intended to highlight the obstacles facing certain groups. Academics tend to engage with legal and policy frameworks and to try to understand their impact. However, all types of movement are not equally well documented. Some factors that appear to play a role in determining the availability of information are:

³⁹ Erika Mouynes, Panama's minister of foreign affairs, "The (Literal) Gap in U.S. Migration Policy," *Foreign Policy*, 24 June 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/24/panama-colombia-darien-jungle-gap-latin-america-migration-crisis-united-states-biden-harris/>

⁴⁰ Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, "Voces y experiencias de la niñez y adolescencia venezolana migrante en Brasil, Colombia, Ecuador y Perú," 2020, clacso.org/en/informe-voces-y-experiencias-de-la-ninez-y-adolescencia-venezolana-migrante-en-brasil-colombia-ecuador-y-peru/

⁴¹ MSF – Médicos Sin Fronteras, "Sin salida la crisis humanitaria de la población migrante y solicitante de asilo atrapada entre Estados Unidos, México y el Triángulo Norte De Centroamérica (TNCA)," 2020.

- the size of the population,
- whether they are moving regularly or irregularly (most of the research focuses on those moving via irregular pathways, who tend to be most vulnerable, and relatively little information is available on those who move regularly),⁴² and
- the interests of the donor community in particular types of movements or regions of origin.

These factors help to explain the volume of research available on the Central America/Mexico corridor. Information is most available on this corridor or Venezuela, and much less is available about the other migration pathways. Gaps in information can be replicated in gaps of service delivery and other policy responses, so there is a need to ensure that balanced and accurate information is gathered and appropriately communicated.

Making the decision to migrate: understanding the inter-related drivers of migration

Migration in the region, as elsewhere in the world, is driven by a variety of inter-related factors, including political instability, violence (including both war and gang violence), economic hardship and poverty, family reunification, climate shocks and natural disasters, among others. Significant research has been done to understand these drivers, but the relative weighing of individual drivers as part of complex, multi-factored household decision-making process, the role of changing climatic patterns and the perspectives of children on these movements are less well understood.

Improving insights into the multiple inter-related and intersecting factors driving the initial decision to move from a community of origin can determine the frame within which refugees and migrants are received, including whether they are offered legal status. Understanding the goals of those on the move can also inform responses. Those who are moving for work, for example, may be reluctant to accept forms of assistance that interfere with their ability to do so. Filling in key gaps in the research and encouraging better communication between researchers and policy makers could promote more effective responses.

Conflict, violence, and political instability

Fragility and political instability are important drivers of migration in the region. For example, rebellion and armed conflict in Colombia has caused massive internal displacement and gang violence is a driver of migration in Central America.

⁴² Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022, p. 167-8.

In these violent contexts, children face unique vulnerabilities. Children can be targets of forced recruitment by rebel and paramilitary groups⁴³ and criminal gangs.⁴⁴ In Central America, children are particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment and related violence.⁴⁵ Very high homicide rates in Central America⁴⁶ disproportionately affects adolescents. In Honduras, adolescent boys are more likely to die from homicide than all other causes combined.⁴⁷ In El Salvador, teenagers represent 27% of all homicide victims.⁴⁸ In Guatemala, young people 15-24 are twice as likely as the population as a whole to be murdered.⁴⁹

The role of policy responses to insecurity in migration decisions are also not well understood. Although addressing insecurity is important, “tough” approaches, focusing on strong police action or support for paramilitary groups can be counterproductive. In Central America, such approaches have lowered the age of criminal liability and increased penalties for criminal association, increasing the number of adolescents in detention.⁵⁰ Such actions can increase the public association of youth with criminality, which can undermine their economic prospects and also undermine trust in the authorities.⁵¹

Domestic violence

There also is some evidence that domestic violence can drive migration. For example, 40% of Central American and Mexican girls and 16% of boys in the US interviewed by UNHCR

⁴³ UN Secretary-General, “Children and armed conflict,” 23 June 2022, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-children-and-armed-conflict.pdf>

⁴⁴ Kathy Watson, “Colombia peace deal failing as gangs recruit vulnerable children,” 5 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-62413672>

⁴⁵ Deborah Fry et al, ‘Violence Against Children in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2015-2021’, Oct 2021, UNICEF and University of Edingburgh, available at <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34481/file/Violence-against-children-full-report.pdf>; and UNICEF, ‘A Statistical Profile of Violence Against Children in Latin America and the Caribbean’, Oct 2022, available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-statistical-profile-of-violence-against-children-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

⁴⁶ El Salvador had the highest homicide rate in the UNODC data base (62 murders per 100,000 people) and Honduras had the 4th highest at 42 in 2017. UNODC International Homicide Statistics database, “Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people),” available at data.worldbank.org.

⁴⁷ UNICEF, *A Familiar Face: Violence in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*, 2017, available at <https://www.unicef-irc.org/files/documents/d-3981-UN0139859.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Save the Children, “The Impact of Violence on Children’s Lives: A Snapshot of Latin America and the Caribbean,” 2017, available at <https://www.savethechildren.net/research-reports/search?page=1®ion=Americas>

⁴⁹ 55.4 per 100,000 vs. 26 per 100,000. Save the Children, “En El Fuego Cruzado: El impacto de la violencia de mara y pandillas en la educación en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica,” 2019, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15619/pdf/en_el_fuego_cruzado_sc.pdf.

⁵⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Violence, Children and Organized Crime,” 11 November 2015, available at <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/ViolenceChildren2016.pdf>

⁵¹ Save the Children, “Should I stay or should I go? Understanding Children’s Migration Decisions in Northern Central America,” April 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/MDI-Should-I-Stay-or-Should-I-Go-Why-Children-Stay-Phase-II-childrens-migration-decisions.pdf/>

mentioned having experienced domestic violence.⁵² However, the sensitivity of the issue and the reluctance of children to speak about it makes it difficult to research.⁵³

Poverty and lack of economic opportunity

Poverty is a major driver of migration worldwide and throughout the region. In one study, 52% of Central American migrants cited economic opportunity as the primary reason for moving, compared to 18% who cited violence and insecurity.⁵⁴ Migrants from Venezuela often cite serious shortages of food and medicine.⁵⁵

Throughout the region, children are more likely to be poor and efforts to eradicate poverty have made less progress with children than others.⁵⁶ In Guatemala, for example, 70% of children under 10 live in poverty,⁵⁷ as compared to 59.3% of all Guatemalans.⁵⁸ Children can also be uniquely vulnerable to poverty, because associated malnutrition and lack of education can have long-term consequences for children's health and earning potential.⁵⁹ Poverty interacts with other factors, however, and does not alone predict migration.

Migration decision making is also influenced by perceptions of prospects, especially for children and youth. For example, in field work carried out in North Central America in 2021, those who envisaged a positive future (most commonly defined as getting a job) were more likely to say they would stay.⁶⁰ However, a more nuanced understanding of how children assess their prospects and more rigorous assessments of the impact of existing programming would be useful in designing programmes that more fully address their needs and concerns.

⁵² UNHCR, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and the Need for International Protection*, 2016, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/56fc266f4.html>

⁵³ Susan Schmidt, "Child Maltreatment & Child Migration: Abuse Disclosures by Central American and Mexican Unaccompanied Migrant Children," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Volume 10, Issue 1, March 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/23315024221078951>

⁵⁴ Congressional Research Service, "Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy," 13 June 2019, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

⁵⁵ Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, "Informe Anual de Violencia," 28 December 2021, <https://observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve/news/informe-anual-de-violencia-2021/>

⁵⁶ World Bank Group, "Childhood Poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean," 2017, <https://olc.worldbank.org/content/childhood-poverty-latin-america-and-caribbean>

⁵⁷ Save the Children, "En El Fuego Cruzado: El impacto de la violencia de mara y pandillas en la educación en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica," 2019, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15619/pdf/en_el_fuego_cruzado_sc.pdf

⁵⁸ Congressional Research Service, "Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy," 13 June 2019, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

⁵⁹ Claudia Barrientos, Virgilio Alvarez Aragon, John-Andrew McNeish, "Guatemala Country Case Study: Child Rights," NORAD and SIDA, 2011, available at https://www.sida.se/contentassets/e89cc7de21d749d991c34ece324881a8/20111-guatemala-country-case-study-child-rights_3126.pdf

⁶⁰ Save the Children, "Should I stay or should I go? Understanding Children's Migration Decisions in Northern Central America," April 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/MDI-Should-I-Stay-or-Should-I-Go-Why-Children-Stay-Phase-II-childrens-migration-decisions.pdf/>

Family reunification

Another key driver of migration in the region, especially for children, is family reunification. In a survey of returning Honduran children, 58% said that they had at least one parent living outside the country.⁶¹ Similarly, in the Dominican Republic family reunification was the most cited reason for moving.⁶²

In some cases, children travel to join parents who migrated earlier with a view to settling and facilitating integration.⁶³ In other cases, disruptions in care arrangements in the home country, e.g. grandparents becoming ill, may act as a trigger. In other cases, however, having family abroad can help to deter children from migrating. For example, in Venezuela, a 2019 study found that only 16% of migrant children and adolescents were from families that received remittances, indicating that access to remittances can decrease demand for migration.⁶⁴

The policy frameworks for family reunification can have important impact. Research among Venezuelan⁶⁵ and Honduran refugees and migrants shows that if legal options are not available, individuals are likely to migrate irregularly and/or engage smugglers.⁶⁶ However, efforts to facilitate family reunification in Ecuador⁶⁷ and Bolivia have not yet been assessed.⁶⁸ The legal framework, availability of information about and assistance with the process and waiting times may also have an impact on access to family reunification in practice.⁶⁹

Climate shocks

⁶¹ Casa Alianza Honduras, “Niñas y niños migrantes. Factores de expulsión y desafíos para su reinserción en Honduras,” Tegucigalpa: Casa Alianza Honduras,

⁶² European Union, Instituto Nacional de Migración de la República Dominicana, “Estudio sobre la situación de niños, niñas y adolescentes con padre/madre de origen extranjero en la República Dominicana,” 2021, <https://inm.gob.do/transparencia/phocadownload/Publicaciones/2021/INM%20estudio%20NNA%20en%20ENI%206x9%20WEB.pdf>

⁶³ See for example, UNHCR, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and the Need for International Protection*, 2016, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/56fc266f4.html>

⁶⁴ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁶⁵ UNHCR, “Vozes das pessoas refugiada no Brasil: Diagnosticos Participativos do ACNUR 2020,” 2020, <https://www.acnur.org/portugues/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ACNUR-Relatorio-Vozes-das-Pessoas-Refugiadas-reduzido.pdf>

⁶⁶ Casa Alianza Honduras, “Niñas y niños migrantes. Factores de expulsión y desafíos para su reinserción en Honduras,” Tegucigalpa: Casa Alianza Honduras, <https://inm.gob.do/transparencia/phocadownload/Publicaciones/2021/INM%20estudio%20NNA%20en%20ENI%206x9%20WEB.pdf>

⁶⁷ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁶⁸ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁶⁹ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

Climate change is also increasingly discussed as a factor in migration decisions and its impact is predicted to increase over the coming century.⁷⁰ In Central America, average temperatures have risen by half a degree since the 1950s and are expected to increase at least another degree by 2050. Rainfall is also increasingly irregular and extreme weather events have grown more frequent.⁷¹ Since 2014, there have been “levels of food insecurity [that] have not been previously seen in the region.”⁷²

However, assessing the role of these changes can be complicated by how interlinked they are with other factors. Usually, it is not the direct climate shock, but rather its impact on livelihoods that is the proximate cause of migration. Climate change may cause crop failure, which may exacerbate poverty and lead to migration. If surveyed, affected populations are likely to speak about poverty, job loss or lack of food as the reasons for migration, minimizing the potential of survey-based instruments to assess the impact of climate.⁷³ One approach that has been used is analysis of large amounts of data from US immigration services to compare the regions of origin of migrants and the regions of greatest climatic stress. By analysing these relationships, researchers have been able to show that climatic events such as the 2014-5 and 2018 droughts in Guatemala significantly increased migration.⁷⁴

Research to establish these relationships more clearly could be useful in several ways. First, it could help to mobilize support, either in the form of more generous immigration policy or greater support for resilience, from countries in the Global North who have contributed more to the emissions that cause climate change and might therefore be seen as having unique responsibility. Second, it could support modelling of migration patterns, which could help to predict, and prepare for, future movements. One example is the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre’s Disaster Risk Model, which seeks to predict the potential of natural disasters to cause displacement. The model is intended to prevent displacement where possible and support lifesaving early warning systems and pre-emptive evacuations when displacement can’t be prevented.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Bermeo, Sarah, “Climate Migration and Climate Finance: Lessons from Central America,” November 19, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/11/19/climate-migration-and-climate-finance-lessons-from-central-america/>

⁷¹ Alexa Rosario, “Climate Change is Hitting Central America Hard. Here is Why it Matters,” *The Years Project*, available at <https://theyearsproject.com/learn/news/climate-change-is-hitting-central-america-hard-heres-why-it-matters/>

⁷² Congressional Research Service, “Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy,” 13 June 2019, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

⁷³ Sarah Bermeo, David Leblang, and Gabriela Nagle Alverio, “Root Causes of Migration from Guatemala: Analysis of Subnational Trends,” *Duke Sanford Center for International Development Policy Brief*, March 2022, <https://dcid.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/03/Migration-Policy-Brief-Guatemala-FINAL.pdf>

⁷⁴ Sarah Bermeo, David Leblang, and Gabriela Nagle Alverio, “Root Causes of Migration from Guatemala: Analysis of Subnational Trends,” *Duke Sanford Center for International Development Policy Brief*, March 2022, <https://dcid.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/03/Migration-Policy-Brief-Guatemala-FINAL.pdf>

⁷⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Global Displacement Risk Model, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/global-displacement-risk-model>

How and to what extent do children select destinations?

Another gap in the literature about migration decision making is how migrants generally, and children specifically, select destinations. In part, this is because the literature in the LAC context is US-centric and tends to often assume that the US is the destination without critical evaluation of whether that is indeed the case. Although, the United States remains the main destination, it is not the only one.⁷⁶

There are opposing schools of thought on the impact of policy on the selection of destination. Exploring this can be complicated by less visible migration. For example, in Central America, children who flee gang violence or attempted recruitment, may move internally. However, they may fear identifying themselves for fear of retribution by gangs⁷⁷ complicating efforts to assess or respond to this movement.

Research has explored the link between immigration policies, which may seek to redirect migrants to another destination, and migration rate. Some research suggests more restrictive immigration policies push migrants elsewhere (e.g., pushing Haitians to leave Chile)⁷⁸ or diverting Venezuelans from Ecuador, to Peru and Colombia. Other research, however, indicates that it is the status, not the number which is impacted.⁷⁹ Some research has argued that greater access to legal authorisation to work can reduce demand for migration by allowing for greater earnings, facilitating remittances, and thereby reducing the need for migration.⁸⁰ Of particular relevance for children in are family reunification policies, many of whose impact has not yet been assessed.

Risks en route

Significant effort has gone into identifying and responding to the most prominent risks facing children on the move, as well as trying to identify risk factors, related to the circumstances of their journey (i.e., where children are travelling alone) or geography (particularly risky points in the journey which may need focused response). Some have sought to elucidate these patterns through research, for example, in 2015 a coalition of 12 organizations, guided by two university partners came together to publish *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America*,

⁷⁶ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf

⁷⁷ Save the Children, "En El Fuego Cruzado: El impacto de la violencia de mara y pandillas en la educación en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica," 2019, available at

https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15619/pdf/en_el_fuego_cruzado_sc.pdf

⁷⁸ Caitlyn Yates, "Haitian Migration through the Americas: A Decade in the Making," *Migration Policy Institute*, 30 September 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-migration-through-americas>

⁷⁹ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022, p.55.

⁸⁰ Benjamin Helms, David Leblang, "Labor Market Policy as Immigration Control: The Case of Temporary Protected Status," *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 66, Issue 3, September 2022, <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article-abstract/66/3/sqac042/6646742?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

which attempted to shed light on the rights violations associated with migration in the region.⁸¹ Others have worked to respond in a number of ways, for example Save the Children run programming to provide support to returning child and adolescent migrants in Central America,⁸² while others, the End Immigration Detention of Children coalition advocate on issues such as ending the detention of children.⁸³

Smuggling

Smuggling is prevalent in the region. A large household survey in Central America found that among those who reported that a household member had migrated, 55% had used a smuggler and migrants from the region were estimated to have spent 1.7 billion on smugglers.⁸⁴ Bolivians are also documented to use smugglers to enter Brazil and to facilitate connections to work there.⁸⁵ There also appear to be specialized networks that cater to children. Haitians use smugglers to move children across the Dominican border.⁸⁶ Smugglers are enabled by tough immigration measures that make travel without their services more difficult.

Smugglers are often seen by communities of origin as providing a legitimate service, although an expensive one. It can take even successful migrants from Central America 11 to 19 months to pay off their debt,⁸⁷ which can cause significant hardship. Although in some cases smugglers are seen as having a protective impact, smuggler can also expose migrants to abuse, abandonment in dangerous areas, kidnapping, extortion physical and sexual assault, torture, or even death.⁸⁸ Children, particularly unaccompanied children, may be particularly vulnerable.

Although it is well documented that restrictive government policies are linked to the flourishing of smuggling operations, governments continue to impose restrictive policies while also

⁸¹ Center for Gender and Refugee Studies of UC Hastings, Universidad Nacional de Lanus, "Childhood and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, Policies, Practices and Challenges," 2015, https://cgrrs.uchastings.edu/sites/default/files/Childhood_Migration_HumanRights_FullBook_English.pdf.

⁸² Save the Children, "Migration and Displacement," <https://lac.savethechildren.net/what-we-do/migration-and-displacement>

⁸³ This is a coalition of more than 160 organisations in more than 50 countries, see <https://endchilddetention.org/who-we-are/>

⁸⁴ Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Rossella Bottone, Jaret Waters, Sarah Williams, Ashley Louie and Yuehan Wang, "Charting a New Regional Course of Action: Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration," Migration Policy Institute, 2021, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-wfp-mit_migration-motivations-costs_final.pdf

⁸⁵ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022.

⁸⁶ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022.

⁸⁷ Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Rossella Bottone, Jaret Waters, Sarah Williams, Ashley Louie and Yuehan Wang, "Charting a New Regional Course of Action: Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration," Migration Policy Institute, 2021, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-wfp-mit_migration-motivations-costs_final.pdf

⁸⁸ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf.

opposing smuggling. Greater engagement between researchers that document these impacts and policy makers could facilitate the creation of more protective policies.

Trafficking

Children in the region are also at risk of trafficking. There has been documentation of Haitian children being trafficked for forced labour in agriculture, as well as in commercial sex work, domestic work, and street begging.⁸⁹ There have also been reports of Venezuelan women and girls being lured into sexual slavery.⁹⁰ However, although areas of high risk are described, there is little detailed information about the incidence of trafficking and individual experiences,⁹¹ in part perhaps because of obstacles to disclosure on the part of victims.

Detention

Another risk faced by migrating children is immigration detention. Some countries, such as Panama, have prohibited the detention of children in migration proceedings. Few, however, have developed sufficient alternatives to detention.⁹² For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, a lack of foster care has left some children in police custody, even though immigration detention is not permitted.⁹³ Others are increasingly adopting detention policies, although presented in euphemistic terms like “securing,” and “accommodation.” This detention is part of an overall movement that criminalises child migration. Detention may also be a prelude to deportation.⁹⁴ The US continues to detain large numbers of children on the southern border, with an estimated 122,000 migrant children taken into detention in FY21.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁹⁰ Devon Cone and Melanie Teff, “Searching for Safety: Confronting Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Venezuelan Women and Girls,” August 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5d472cc87370400001f5dc52/1564945609233/Venezuela+Trafficking+Report+-+August+2019+-+FINAL.pdf>

⁹¹ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁹² Cernadas, Pablos Ceriani, Lila García, and Ana Gómez Salas, “Niñez y adolescencia en el contexto de la migración: principios, avances y desafíos en la protección de sus derechos en América latina y el Caribe,” REMHU - Rev. Interdiscipl. Mobil. Hum., Brasília, Año XXII, n. 42, p. 9-28, jan./jun. 2014, https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/35628/CONICET_Digital_Nro.11074661-d4e8-41ab-9551-c55600bc4398_A.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

⁹³ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁹⁴ Cernadas, Pablos Ceriani, Lila García, and Ana Gómez Salas, “Niñez y adolescencia en el contexto de la migración: principios, avances y desafíos en la protección de sus derechos en América latina y el Caribe,” REMHU - Rev. Interdiscipl. Mobil. Hum., Brasília, Año XXII, n. 42, p. 9-28, jan./jun. 2014, https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/35628/CONICET_Digital_Nro.11074661-d4e8-41ab-9551-c55600bc4398_A.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

⁹⁵ Montoya-Galvez, “U.S. shelters received a record 122,000 unaccompanied migrant children,” *CBS News*, 23 December 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/immigration-122000-unaccompanied-migrant-children-us-shelters-2021/>

The negative impacts of detention on children are well documented,⁹⁶ but immigration detention of children persists. More practical understandings of principle of non-custodial measures could promote be useful in promoting policies that address community concern without detention.

What are the systems for response?

The protection of children from the types of harm listed above is dependent on the existence of appropriate response systems en route, including those to regularize their legal status, and child protection systems that can identify the victims of violations and refer them to appropriate services.

One common programming response is awareness raising about the dangers of unsafe migration and smuggling. However, children in contexts of high migration often have a good deal of information prior to awareness raising interventions,⁹⁷ calling into question the effectiveness of these interventions. In addition, there has been little evaluation of such efforts.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the approach to promote safe migration for children should be encouraged.

Another response has been to offer reception centres which at times offer short term accommodation alongside other services including legal information, hygiene, and referrals. Some efforts have been made to make these centres child-friendly, providing play areas and specialised psychosocial support. In some areas, mobile teams provide these services. In other contexts, accommodation is offered. In Mexico, Save the Children has supported the establishment of child friendly spaces in 10 shelters, case management and psychosocial support. In Brazil, shelters were set up particularly for children and adolescents, but pressure on space has meant that children are sometimes placed in mixed shelters with adults or are forced to live on the street.⁹⁹

Alternative care

⁹⁶ See, for example, International Detention Coalition, “Captured Childhood,” 2012, <https://idcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Captured-Childhood-FINAL-June-2012.pdf>

⁹⁷ See, for example, Save the Children, “Should I stay or should I go? Understanding Children’s Migration Decisions in Northern Central America,” April 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/MDI-Should-I-Stay-or-Should-I-Go-Why-Children-Stay-Phase-II-childrens-migration-decisions.pdf/>

⁹⁸ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

⁹⁹ UNHCR, “Evaluation of UNHCR prevention of, and response to, SGBV in Brazil focusing on the Population of Concern from Venezuela,” 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/research/evalreports/5de7d8df4/evaluation-unhcr-prevention-response-sgbv-brazil-focusing-population-concern.html>

Alternative care models for migrant children in Latin America operate within a broader framework of alternative care in the region. Despite the wealth of research that shows that institutionalization is harmful to children and a range of efforts to promote alternatives in the region, the most frequent response to the need for out of home placements in the region is residential care. There are an estimated 187,129 children in residential care in Latin America.¹⁰⁰ However, in recent years significant efforts have been made to promote improved alternative care arrangements, and a key facet of these efforts is providing family-based care. Jamaica has made significant progress in removing children from institutions to family care, focusing on its nationals, from 40% of children in state care in a family environment in 2004, up to 67% in 2022.¹⁰¹

The focus on institutionalization is also reflected in approaches to placement of refugee and migrant children. In Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, institutional care has been the dominant response. Efforts to promote family based care, or at least more personalised services, have also been targeted at refugee and migrant children. UNHCR advocacy has expanded the number of migrant children who can be placed in foster care in Ecuador.¹⁰² Brazil has an alternative childcare system that aims at keeping children out of institutions by housing them with extended family members, and this has, thanks to UNHCR advocacy, been extended to Venezuelan children. Problems, however, arose in relation to adolescent girls in relationships with adult men, who were sometimes given guardianship.¹⁰³ In Colombia, Ecuador and Durango, Mexico programmes have been piloted which allow adolescents nearing adulthood to live independently.¹⁰⁴ There has been resistance to new alternative care models in Mexico, however, because local authorities in some areas are reluctant to host centres for fear that these will attract more migrant and refugee children to their regions.¹⁰⁵ In other instances, efforts have been made to improve institutional responses. For example, in Guatemala, UNICEF was able to successfully advocate for the creation of special shelters for unaccompanied children.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Natalia Valencia Corral, Monica Lopez and Martha Frias Armenta, "Children in residential care in Mexico: Understanding profiles, trajectories and outcomes," *Child & Family Social Work*, 2021, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/cfs.12862>

¹⁰¹ The Child Protection & Family Services Agency, "Beyond Institutionalization: The process of transformation of Alternative Care Systems," June 16, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/36666/file>

¹⁰² Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022.

¹⁰³ UNHCR, "Evaluation of UNHCR prevention of, and response to, SGBV in Brazil focusing on the Population of Concern from Venezuela," 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/research/evalreports/5de7d8df4/evaluation-unhcr-prevention-response-sgbv-brazil-focusing-population-concern.html>

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Nexus Consultores, "Evaluación de las intervenciones en materia de migración en México, Guatemala, Honduras y El Salvador," February 2021, p.48, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34121/file/Evaluacion-de-las-intervenciones-en-materia-de-migracion-en-mexico.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022.

In the literature reviewed for this discussion paper, standard setting and advocacy materials were much more commonly found than research on the actual conditions of migrant children in alternative care and/or on the efficacy of various reform efforts. For example, a UNICEF and IACHR report in 2013 called for an end to institutionalization, including in “migrant holding centres” in the Americas.¹⁰⁷ A review by Nexus Consultores of UNICEF programming in Mexico cited the adoption of a new national alternative care model as the main accomplishment of the organization’s 2017–2020 interventions.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published a practical guide on family unit protection in the context of migration and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁹ UNHCR has taken up some of the same issues, e.g. social workers should not manage more than 25 cases and every carer should not be responsible for more than eight children.¹¹⁰

Efforts were made to encourage replication of an Italian model through both facilitation of exchange visits and the creation of guidelines based on alternative care arrangements in Italy.¹¹¹ An effort was made to employ these models in practice in the development of the Jasson and Alexander Reception Centre for returnee children in Tijuana.¹¹² In addition, pilot programmes allowing for foster care and open-door accommodations in Chihuahua and Chiapas have been adopted.¹¹³ Despite the note that these programmes were intended to generate new knowledge, no research on, or evaluations of, these programs were found. Indeed, few assessments of the perspectives of refugee and migrant children specifically are available. However, one exception is a study of migrant and refugee child perspectives generally (including shelter). This report notes that adolescents saw alternative care arrangements as undermining their efforts to find work and support their families.¹¹⁴

Learning from alternative models of care for nationals in LAC

¹⁰⁷ UNICEF, IACHR, and the Organization of American States, “The Right of Boys and Girls to a Family. Alternative Care. Ending Institutionalization in the Americas,” 2013, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/report-right-to-family_0.pdf/

¹⁰⁸ Nexus Consultores, “Evaluación de las intervenciones en materia de migración en México, Guatemala, Honduras y El Salvador,” February 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34121/file/Evaluacion-de-las-intervenciones-en-materia-de-migracion-en-mexico.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Practical Guide: How can family unit protection and family reunification be made more effective in situations of human mobility and mixed movements, and in the context of the pandemic?” https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/guia_practica_migracion_ing.pdf

¹¹⁰ UNHCR, “Medidas de Cuidado Alternativo,” <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/tehis/vtx/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=59db43ee4>

¹¹¹ SNDIF and UNICEF, “Alternative care model for migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children in Mexico: An implementation guide,” 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/mexico/media/4871/file/Alternative%20Care%20Model%20for%20Migrant%202020.pdf>

¹¹² Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022.

¹¹³ Nexus Consultores, “Evaluación de las intervenciones en materia de migración en México, Guatemala, Honduras y El Salvador,” February 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34121/file/Evaluacion-de-las-intervenciones-en-materia-de-migracion-en-mexico.pdf>

¹¹⁴ Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, “Voces y experiencias de la niñez y adolescencia venezolana migrante en Brasil, Colombia, Ecuador y Perú,” CLASCO 2020.

Although the literature on alternative care arrangements for migrant and refugee children is sparse, there is a much wider body of literature available on alternative care for nationals in this region as well as a vibrant network of activists working on the issue. A literature review focusing on alternative care in Latin America found 285 sources published between 2010 and 2017. Although the review was able to gather significant information on legal and institutional frameworks, it noted that data was insufficient to provide a full picture in all countries.¹¹⁵ A review of alternative care in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru also pointed to lack of information as an obstacle. It pointed to the lack of gender and age disaggregated data. It also noted the failure to explore the impact of racial stigma although in Brazil Black and Mestizo children are more likely than white children to end up in alternative care.¹¹⁶

One positive effort has been to integrate the lived experiences of children in care in research and advocacy. Doncel, an Argentinean civil society organization, has engaged children in care to act as peer-to-peer researchers, highlighting the voices and lived experiences of children.¹¹⁷ A recent survey catalogued the areas of focus of advocacy by children and youth with lived experience and found the largest focus were improvement of care working conditions, supporting policies for care leavers, and promoting individualized care.¹¹⁸ In addition, evaluations of alternative care programming were found. For example, in Guatemala, a methodology called Changing the Way We Care was piloted and documented, with in depth study and documentation of its application carried out. The analysis found that more intensive follow up could facilitate moving children out of institutionalized care.¹¹⁹

Building stronger linkages between existing general alternative care programs and migrant specific ones might be useful. In a recent directory of activists working on alternative care models in the region, only four reported dealing with refugee and migrant issues,¹²⁰ indicating that there is not much overlap between those working on alternative care generally and those particularly focused on migration. However, there can be overlaps in that migrant children may

¹¹⁵ Martha Fernández Daza, "Cuidado alternativo de niños, niñas y adolescentes en Latinoamérica: Estado actual de acogimiento familiar," 2018,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323614228_Cuidado_alternativo_de_ninos_ninas_y_adolescentes_en_Latinoamerica_Estado_actual_del_Acogimiento_Familiar

¹¹⁶ Red Latinoamericana de Egresados de Protección, with DONCEL, Hope and Homes for Children and UNICEF, "More Independence & Rights," 2020, <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Investigacio%CC%81n-Regional-English-version.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Doncel, Flaco, UNICEF, "Construyendo Autonomía: Un estudio entre pares sobre la transición a la vida adulta de jóvenes sin cuidados parentales," 2015, https://doncel.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Autonom%C3%ADa_resumen-ejecutivo_WEB.pdf

¹¹⁸ Doncel, "Regional Mapping of Activists with Lived Experience of Alternative Care in Latin America and the Caribbean," 2022, https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/editob_ing_26octubre_2022mapeo.pdf

¹¹⁹ USAID, GHR, MacArthur Foundation, "Application of the Case Management Methodology Process: Guatemala Report," March 2020, https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/29.01_EN_Case%20Management%20Systematization%20in%20Guatemala.pdf

¹²⁰ Activismo de egresados de protección en ALC, "Directorio de activistas que vivieron en cuidados alternativos en América Latina y el Caribe," available at <https://doncel.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Directorio-de-activistas-que-vivieron-en-cuidados-alternativos-en-America-Latina-y-el-Caribe.pdf>

end up accessing services designed primarily for nationals. In such cases, creative strategies may help to better identify special needs. As an example, in the US efforts have been made to create a tool to assess experiences of trafficking among runaway and homeless youth in the US, some of whom are migrants. The tools included a section on migration experiences and included 5% of foreign-born youth in the test sample.¹²¹ Similar approaches are likely to be useful elsewhere as well. Additional assessments of practice would be useful. In addition, exchange of best practices within the region could be facilitated.

In addition, efforts have been made to strengthen national level structures intended to identify and respond to child protection concerns. For example, in Mexico, *Oficiales de Protección de la Infancia* (Child Protection Officers) have been created to promote the rights of children in migration processes. However, these actors have been criticised as focusing too much on repatriation, regardless of a full assessment of the best interests of the child.¹²² In some cases, national efforts are supported by international actors. For example, UNICEF worked with the government of Colombia to ensure that the needs of children were included in the EPTV (humanitarian visa) program that was put in place to respond to the Venezuelan influx. In Ecuador, UNCHR and IOM worked with the government to develop a system for protecting children on the move. The problem is that compared with other regions, there has been relatively little research or evaluation of the efficacy of these programs.¹²³ Although support for these programs is critical, more nuanced understandings of previous successes and research on the drivers and dynamics of policy making and implementation could ensure that they are better targeted and more effective.

Access to rights and integration at destination

Migration can present both opportunities and challenges for child migrants. Children may benefit from higher standards of living in the destination country, or face marginalisation, discrimination, barriers to accessing social services and other difficulties. The extent to which children's experiences are positive or negative is strongly linked to the policy context in the destination country.

The practical access of children to other rights is often dependent on their ability to access identity documents and legal status in the destination country. The lack of access a legal identity and/or a right to stay can cause a raft of injustice. This is the case with children of

¹²¹ Meredith Dank, Jennifer Yahner, Lilly Yu, Carla Vasquez, Julia Gelatt and Michale Pergamit, "Pretesting a Human Trafficking Screening Tool in the Child Welfare and Runaway and Homeless Youth Systems," 2017, https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/pretesting_tool_0.pdf

¹²² Cernadas, Pablos Ceriani, Lila García, and Ana Gómez Salas, "Niñez y adolescencia en el contexto de la migración: principios, avances y desafíos en la protección de sus derechos en América latina y el Caribe," REMHU - Rev. Interdiscipl. Mobil. Hum., Brasília, Año XXII, n. 42, p. 9-28, jan./jun. 2014, https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/35628/CONICET_Digital_Nro.11074661-d4e8-41ab-9551-c55600bc4398_A.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

¹²³ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022.

Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, many of whom been rendered stateless by a series actions, including a 2013 Supreme Court decision which ruled that only persons born in the Dominican Republic to citizens or legal residents are Dominican.¹²⁴ For example, school enrolment of children of Haitian descent in the country dropped by 5% following the decision. It also exposes children to the risks of irregular movement as parents who wish to visit (or have their children visit) Haiti and return are more often forced to rely on smugglers to circumvent border restrictions.¹²⁵ In El Salvador, displaced persons have reported that children who do not have birth certificates are not able to go to school, even though many had to flee without key documents or lost them on the way.¹²⁶ In other contexts, access to health care can also be affected. For example, in Argentina facilities often ask for national identity documents, despite the legal recognition of the need to offer access regardless of immigration status.¹²⁷

Efforts have been made, by UNICEF and others, to avoid the risk of stateless by promoting access to birth registration by children of migrants in many parts of the region. In Panama, there have been efforts to ensure that children born to parents en route.¹²⁸ In Colombia, President Ivan Duque issued a resolution allowing children of Venezuelans who were born in the country since 2015 to access citizenship to prevent statelessness.¹²⁹ Elsewhere in the region, for example in the United States or in Brazil,¹³⁰ nationality is extended to anyone born on the territory, obviating the need for the extension of such special programs, although there may be practical difficulties in obtaining the necessary documentation.¹³¹

In addition to documentation, access to legal status impacts children and families, as those who have legal status generally have access to a fuller range of services than those who do not.¹³² In

¹²⁴ Cernadas, Pablos Ceriani, Lila García, and Ana Gómez Salas, “Niñez y adolescencia en el contexto de la migración: principios, avances y desafíos en la protección de sus derechos en América latina y el Caribe,” REMHU - Rev. Interdiscipl. Mobil. Hum., Brasília, Año XXII, n. 42, p. 9-28, jan./jun. 2014, https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/35628/CONICET_Digital_Nro.11074661-d4e8-41ab-9551-c55600bc4398_A.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

¹²⁵ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022, p.33.

¹²⁶ USAID and NRC, “Quiero mi lugar: Los derechos de vivienda, la tierra y la propiedad (VTP) de las personas afectadas por el desplazamiento en el Salvador,” July 2022, <https://nrc.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Quiero-mi-lugar-versi%C3%B3n-final-SV-15082022-1.pdf>

¹²⁷ Bondar, Cesar Ivan and Elena Maria Krautstoftl, “Provincia de Misiones,” 2015, <https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/handle/11336/123189>

¹²⁸ UNICEF Panamá – Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia Panamá. 2021. Reporte temático niñez y migración No 2. Panama City: UNICEF.

¹²⁹ UN News, “Colombia offer nationality rights to Venezuelan children born there: UN hails ‘very important step,’” 6 August 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1043771>

¹³⁰ See, for example, Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, “Whether an individual born in Brazil to parents who are not Brazilian citizens, has Brazilian citizenship,” 10 May 2010, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4d2ab7db2.html>

¹³¹ See, for example, Elisa Carino, “Made in America: How Birth Certificate Applications Infringe on the Right to Citizenship,” *NYU Review of Law & Social Change*, Vol 43, Issue 2, 2017, https://socialchangenyu.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Elisa-Carino_RLSC_43.2-1.pdf

¹³² Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, “Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence,” June 2022, p.46.

some areas, migration can also make it harder to access assistance, either because migrants are afraid to report due to their immigration status, because they don't qualify for some types of assistance in non-native areas or because they are simply unfamiliar with available resources.¹³³ Both their own status and that of their parents may be relevant. Some evidence indicates that parents with legal status generally have access to better work opportunities and more comprehensive social insurance and are therefore better able to meet the needs of their children. Although there is clear evidence that those with legal status earn more,¹³⁴ a recent evidence review concluded that "no studies provide empirical evidence" that regularization of parents leads to better outcomes for children.¹³⁵

In some parts of the region, children enjoy protection against deportation without being granted a durable long-term status. Elsewhere in the region, deportation is common. It was estimated that Mexico deported 90 and 70 percent of the unaccompanied Central American taken into custody in 2019 and 2020 respectively. Although best interest determinations are carried out, they do not prevent deportation in most cases. Similarly, the US deports almost all unaccompanied Mexican children that it intercepts.¹³⁶

One pathway to long term status is to apply for asylum. In the US, however, there have been ongoing efforts to interpret and reform US immigration law in such a way as to limit access to protection, in particular by Central American children. Part of this effort was the effort of the US government to exclude those facing gang violence from accessing protection, arguing that such cases fall outside the traditional definition of a refugee.¹³⁷ Another obstacle that has been put in place to accessing legal status in the US is the "remain in Mexico" policy under which asylum seekers are asked to remain in Mexico until their cases are adjudicated. In February 2022, Human Rights Watch reported that at least 21,300 asylum seeking children were sent with their parents to Mexico under the "Remain in Mexico" initiative during Trump's term in office, constituting 30% of all asylum seekers placed into the program. However, only .6 percent of children in the program have been granted any type of relief.¹³⁸ The Remain in Mexico Program has led some parents to send their children across the border unaccompanied because they perceive this as the best chance for finding protection for their children.¹³⁹

¹³³ UNICEF, "Research that Drives Change: Conceptualizing and conducting nationally led violence prevention research, Synthesis report of the "Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children" in Italy, Peru, Viet Nam, and Zimbabwe," 2018, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Drivers-of-Violence_Study.pdf

¹³⁴ Helms, Benjamin and David LeBlang, "Labor Market Policy as Immigration Control: The Case of Temporary Protection Status," *International Studies Quarterly* (2022).

¹³⁵ Rachel Marcus, Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, "Children on the move in Latin America: Review of evidence," June 2022, p.176.

¹³⁶ Amnesty International, "USA and Mexico deporting thousands of unaccompanied migrant children into harm's way," 11 June 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/06/estados-unidos-mexico-deportan-miles-ninos-migrantes-situaciones-peligro/>

In general, there is significant evidence that those without identity documentation or legal status are more vulnerable. However, less data is available on the positive impacts of documentation and regularization efforts. A recent evidence review concluded that there was little “evidence on the effectiveness of legal assistance and documentation support activities.” And despite being lauded, there no comprehensive evaluation of the impact of naturalization initiatives like the one carried out in Colombia was found. Such analysis, however, could be useful in advocating for, and formulating similar initiatives in the future.

Gaps in the data and discussion questions

A variety of gaps in research and information have been discussed in the preceding pages. This section seeks to draw together these queries into broader themes that can serve as the basis for discussion at the conference.

National, Regional and International Policy Impacts: How do different policies within and beyond the region affect child migrants’ decision-making and outcomes?

- How do migration policies impact child migration patterns and outcomes? Can migration policies reduce migration? Do policies influence destinations or modes of migration?
 - To what extent are connections between policy and outcomes established in the research? Are those that are established accepted in the policy community?
 - To what extent are the impacts for children specifically understood? (e.g., family reunification policies? Differential policies for children and their parents/guardians?)
 - What effects do these policies have on programming and implementation in different regions and sectors (e.g. child protection)?
- How does understanding the motivations and status of migrant and refugee populations influence the design and implementation of assistance programming?
- To what extent are the unique perspectives of children understood and taken into account in the design of both policy and programming?

Children’s access to rights, legal identity, and civil registration

- What common and distinct barriers to accessing rights, legal identity, and civil registration exist across countries and contexts, and how can existing national or regional approaches address some of these?
- What good practices exists within and beyond the region to reduce barriers to these rights both in terms of legal process and addressing administrative barriers? (E.g., The impact of positive efforts like Colombia’s child naturalization effort)
- To what extent have policy and program interventions been evaluated and their implications understood?

- Does evidence, including academic research, and practice align with practices and outcomes regarding access to these areas? In areas where it does, how could evidence enhance practice or how could practice inform research in these areas?
- Does evidence or practice illustrate important existing ‘workarounds’ to accessing rights to legal identity through accessing other rights (e.g. efforts to include children in education or healthcare systems presenting opportunities for legal recognition)?

Approaches to care in transit, including models of alternative childcare for mobile populations

- What evidence, including evaluations, exists in the region on alternative childcare arrangements (distinct from existing guidance)?
- From practice (programming, policy, advocacy by UNICEF LACRO and partners), what promising examples of good practice exist to build upon?
- To what extent has policy and practice in the region been documented and its impact assessed?
- To what extent are examples from beyond the region (e.g. in Europe) useful or applicable, and how? In areas where they fall short, what data and evidence gaps remain?
- If analysis of existing programs were carried out, how could exchange and cross-border learning across the region be facilitated?
- What are the causes of gaps in models of alternative childcare, and how can these be addressed?

Cross-border knowledge management

- How are knowledge products, including data and research findings, shared between agencies and academia across borders, and how could this be improved in terms of efficiency, partnership opportunities, and child wellbeing outcomes?
 - What are the gaps in access to information?
 - Are there ways in which greater consistency in methods for collecting data might facilitate comparative and regional analysis? What are the obstacles to collecting this and how might these be addressed?
 - Are there obstacles to ensuring effective utilisation of data that is collected? Is some data not shared? Is the lack of donor support undermining some areas of exploration (for example on South-South migration)?
 - How could research, data and analysis be made more accessible?
- What can we learn from existing models of cross-border data management in the humanitarian sector?
- To what extent is country data used or available within LAC for analysis and synthesis by both practitioners and researchers? How could this be better accessed and utilized?

- How could modelling methodologies be more effectively utilized to inform policy and practice? (E.g. to anticipate new migratory flows (and the extent to which children are likely to be included and prepare or to better understand the potential impact of various policy options)
- How could further research and evidence inform good practice in this area?
- How can modelling techniques in particular be better developed and used? For example, can it help us to better assess policies in a gender and age-sensitive way?

Conclusion

As this paper shows, there is rich information available on the situation of migrant children in the LAC region. There are also significant gaps in information and analysis and in exchange between researchers and policy makers. In this context, consolidating evidence, identifying gaps, and facilitating opportunities to foster new collaborative relationships, and deepen existing partnerships, around evidence-generation and action holds the potential to substantially improve policy and practice in the region. It is hoped that the information provided in this discussion paper will encourage such discussion and collaboration.

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