

Structural and Contingent Inequalities: The Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant and Refugee Populations in South America

GISELA P. ZAPATA

Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

VICTORIA PRIETO ROSAS

Universidad de la Republica Uruguay, Uruguay

In a comparative assessment of the pre-pandemic living conditions of migrants and refugees in six South American countries, we analyse the structural and contingent challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on these populations. We argue that they are particularly exposed to the harmful effects of the pandemic, given their segmented incorporation into labour markets and their limited and fragmented access to and exercise of health, housing, and other social rights. The evidence points to a significant deterioration in their livelihoods and social inclusion, and potential profound changes in (im)mobility regimes caused by pandemic-induced restrictive measures.

Keywords: COVID-19, impacts, migrants, refugees, responses, South America.

Around mid-March 2020, Latin American governments adopted a set of measures to contain the COVID-19 outbreak – physical distancing and confinement, border militarisation and closure – and to mitigate its socioeconomic impacts among the most vulnerable social groups – cash transfers, food and basic services provision (Bengochea et al., 2020).

This paper develops a systematic comparative assessment of the pre-pandemic living conditions of migrant and refugee populations (henceforth, ‘migrants’), combining microdata from census and household surveys with an analysis of the political-institutional response to COVID-19 adopted by six South American countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay, between 10 March and 16 May 2020.

By focusing on the structural and contingent challenges imposed by the crisis on vulnerable populations, we argue that migrants have been particularly exposed to the harmful effects of the pandemic, given their precarious working and living conditions and their limited mobility and access to social protection.

The COVID-19 pandemic and government responses across the region have deepened pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities in terms of access to and effective exercise of health, labour, housing, and other social rights. Given the varying degrees of legal and social protection afforded to migrants in the region (Gandini Prieto Rosas and Lozano-Ascencio, 2019) these inequalities have meant that a significant proportion of migrants are being left out of the prevention and response plans to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

Pre-Existing Inequalities and Vulnerabilities

At the start of the pandemic, South American economies, except for Colombia, were already slowing down and the informal economy still accounted for more than half of workers in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru (Table 1). Despite the reduction in poverty achieved by the region in the past decade, 40 percent of the population is still trapped in a vicious circle of social vulnerability – low skilled jobs with little or no social protection and unstable incomes (OCDE et al., 2019). Countries such as Ecuador and Brazil, which had both low GDP growth and a high prevalence of informal employment, will be among those most affected by the economic downturn provoked by the pandemic (IMF, 2020).

Increasing numbers of intra-regional migrants have fled precarious labour markets, only to join other precarious labour markets – where they could (Carrasco and Suárez, 2019). The unemployment rate for immigrants before the pandemic was, on average, twice that of nationals, with unemployment in extreme cases, such as Peru, being four times higher among immigrants (Table 1). But vulnerability, in terms of access to and quality of housing and labour, varied across groups. For instance, Venezuelan migrants were the most vulnerable group in Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. In turn, Haitians and Cubans were, respectively, the most vulnerable in Chile and Uruguay (Table 1). The particular vulnerability of migrants from these three origins is related to the traits they have in common: arriving at their destinations in large numbers, in a short period of time, fleeing from contexts of socio-political or environmental crisis.

Unsurprisingly, this precarious social incorporation, along with negative attitudes towards immigrant workers, has occurred even in countries with fully or partially implemented human rights-based migration legislation (Table 1).

What COVID-19 is Exposing

By mid-March, most countries across the region had militarised and/or closed borders to non-citizens and non-residents, in response to the pandemic (IADB, 2020). This has jeopardised the universal human right to freedom of movement into and out of countries of origin and the safeguarding of countries' humanitarian protection systems. In addition, asylum procedures, visa and residence permit applications have been suspended or delayed, which has further complicated migrants' access to documentation. This is particularly problematic, as in many countries most public pandemic mitigation programmes – income support, housing provision, rent subsidies, etc. – exclude undocumented populations.

Given the high concentration of migrants in jobs that demand continued exposure to the public, physical distancing policies mean that these populations are already among those hardest hit by the pandemic: the income of informal workers in Latin America

Table 1. Selected Country Indicators 2015–2019

| | Population Indicators | | | | Country Indicators | | |
|----------|--|---|---|---|--|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | Immigrants (share of population), 2017–2019 ¹ | Most vulnerable origins, 2017–2019 ¹ | Gap in unemployment (immigrants/nationals) 2017–2019 ¹ | Negative attitudes to immigration** 2015 ² | Implemented Human Rights based migration policy, 2018 ³ | GDP growth 2019 ⁴ | Informal employment 2018 ⁵ |
| Brazil | 1,266,753 (0.6%) ⁶ | Venezuelans ⁷ | – | 43.7 | Partially | 1.1 | 40.9 ⁸ |
| Chile | 784,685 (4.5%) | Haitians | 0.9 | 55.4 | No | 1.1 | 27.7 |
| Colombia | 963,492 (2.2%) | Venezuelans | 1.8 | 37.2 | No | 3.3 | 57.3 |
| Ecuador | 343,440* (2.0%) | Venezuelans* | 1.7* | 53.4 | Fully | 0.1 | 64.8 |
| Peru | 178,881 (0.6%) | Venezuelans | 4.1 | 49.2 | No | 2.2 | 59.9 |
| Uruguay | 94,196* (2.7%) | Cubans and Dominicans* | 1.2* | 29.9 | Fully | 0.2 | 23.5 |

¹ Authors' calculations, based on microdata from INE (2018), DANE (2019), INEC (2019), INEI (2018), INE (2020). These data does not capture the foreign-born population arriving after the census/survey.

² Authors' calculations based on Latinobarómetro (2020).

³ Zapata and Prieto (2020).

⁴ IMF (2020).

⁵ Informal employment as a percentage of total non-agricultural employment, ILO (2020b).

⁶ Cavalcanti, Oliveira and Macedo (2019).

⁷ Simões et al. (2017).

⁸ IBGE (2018).

*The estimated number of migrants exclude people living in collective dwellings therefore the actual size of this population may be higher.

**Share of people who agreed with the statement: 'citizens of other countries come to compete for our jobs'.

Structural and Contingent Inequalities

and the Caribbean decreased by 81 percent in the first month of the crisis (ILO, 2020a); and 1.2 million Venezuelans in Colombia and Ecuador are expected to suffer severe food insecurity (WFP, 2020). In addition, most migrants in South American cities reside in overcrowded and often precarious collective dwellings, rented rooms, or self-help settlements (Fossatti and Uriarte, 2018; Serrano Pucci and Véras, 2019; Vera and Adler, 2020). These conditions not only render these populations more vulnerable to the risks associated with the virus, but may also curtail their ability to follow basic prevention measures such as hand-washing and physical distancing.

COVID-19 has also brought to the fore the issue of access to and coverage of health systems. In Brazil, Ecuador and Uruguay, migrants' access to the national health service is guaranteed by the constitution regardless of legal status (Bengochea et al., 2020). In contrast, Colombia and Peru limit access based on migrants' legal status (except for emergencies), while Chile presents systematic deficiencies in the access to and use of medical care by immigrants compared to the native-born (Cabieses and Oyarte, 2020). Moreover, the historical fragility of the region's health systems means that although many countries pledge to offer universal health coverage, in practice only partial coverage is available (Kanavos et al., 2019).

As has been widely documented, crises tend to increase anti-immigrant sentiment (Creighton et al. 2015; Hatton, 2016). This particular crisis seems to be no different. Echoing developments worldwide (HRW, 2020), COVID-19 is fuelling racism, discrimination and xenophobia against migrants in Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil, where negative attitudes towards migrants have increased in recent years (see Table 1) (UN, 2020). In Chile and Peru, expressions of social, institutional and media racism have involved stereotyping and scapegoating, and blaming migrants for the spread of COVID-19 (Ramírez, 2020; Winter, 2020).

The expected deep contraction in global GDP – 5.2 percent in 2020 – as a result of the combined effects of the health and economic crises is expected to reduce global remittances by 20 percent (World Bank, 2020a, 2020b). This will aggravate economic problems, since remittances are a vital source of income for many households and economies, especially in the Andean region and Venezuela (Freitez, 2019; Ratha et al., 2019).

In this context, the pandemic is reconfiguring mobility dynamics in the region, leading to 'mobility in immobility', that is, the emergence of two distinct but interrelated processes: return and forced (im)mobility (Bengochea et al., 2020; Vera Espinoza, Zapata and Gandini, 2020). On the one hand, the loss of livelihood in their recently adopted homes has driven many migrants to take extraordinary measures 'from below', leading to a sort of 'panic mobility' involving return to their crisis-ridden countries of origin (Cohen, 2020). Such is the case of the mass return – often on foot – of thousands of Venezuelan migrants from Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru (Flórez, 2020).

On the other hand, unprecedented 'from above' border closures and travel restrictions have led to new forms of involuntary/forced immobility such as limited cross-border movements for those already inside the territory and curbed the ability to seek refuge for those still outside. Such is the case of Bolivian and Peruvian migrants trapped at the Chilean border (Laing, 2020) or Paraguayans in Brazil stranded at the bridge that connects the two countries (Baran, 2020). In the medium and long term, these new dynamics may lead to profound changes in mobility regimes, that is, the national and international regulatory and surveillance structures that shape individual (im)mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013).

Conclusions

The structural and contingent inequalities and vulnerabilities laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic may accelerate processes leading to social exclusion. The poor and the lower middle classes may once again be the hardest hit by the crisis, but migrants and refugees are particularly exposed to the harmful effects of the pandemic given their segmented incorporation into precarious labour markets and limited and fragmented access to and exercise of health, labour, housing, and other social rights.

Moreover, the typical adaptive response of return or remigration is not available to all, as the political-institutional response to the pandemic by South American countries has produced a scenario that combines confinement and immobility with new forms of mobility. These developments are increasing the vulnerability of migrants who attempt to cross militarised/closed borders and irregular migration as a consequence of the suspension of migration and asylum procedures.

These new dynamics open up a series of questions, including: What consequences will 'temporary' border closures have for those who depend on cross-border mobility to guarantee their survival and that of their families at home or who are fleeing from political-humanitarian crises? How will the anti-immigrant sentiment develop in the context of a long and deep economic downturn? How might such factors affect migrants' social and economic integration, in the face of the reorientation of government and international/civil society organisations' priorities? Will these developments increase the vulnerability of emigrant-sending countries in the region, especially those highly dependent on remittances? For the present, it seems that these elements may combine in such a way as to make future intra- and inter-regional migration flows and governance unpredictable.

Acknowledgements

The ideas expressed in this article are part of an ongoing multi-sited, regional and interdisciplinary project of the Research Group 'Comparative Analysis on International Migration and Displacement in the Americas' (CAMINAR).

REFERENCES

- Baran, K. (2020) 'Paraguaios que tentam sair do Brasil ficam retidos por dias na Ponte da Amizade'. Folha de São Paulo, 28 April 2020.
- Bengochea, J. et al. (2020) 'COVID-19 y población migrante y refugiada. Análisis de las respuestas político-institucionales en ciudades' in F. Vera and V. Adler (eds.) *Inmigrando: fortalecer ciudades destino*, Vol. 2. BID: (in press), Buenos Aires.
- Cabienes, B. and Oyarte, M. (2020) 'Acceso a salud en inmigrantes: identificando brechas para la protección social en salud'. *Revista de Saúde Pública* 54(20): 1–13.
- Carrasco, I. and Suárez, J. I. (2019) 'Inmigración e inclusión laboral y protección social según el origen y el tiempo de residencia de los migrantes en países seleccionados de América Latina'. *Notas de población* 108: 99–131.
- Cavalcanti, L., Oliveira, T. and Macedo, M. (2019) *Imigração e Refúgio no Brasil. Relatório Anual 2019. Série Migrações. Observatório das Migrações Internacionais (OBMi-gra)*, Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública/ Conselho Nacional de Imigração e Coordenação Geral de Imigração Laboral. Brasília, DF.

Structural and Contingent Inequalities

- Cohen, R. (2020) ‘“Take me Home”: The Coronavirus Virus and Panic Mobility’. *Blogs*, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS): Oxford. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/take-me-home-the-coronavirus-virus-and-panic-mobility/> [accessed 25 September 2020].
- Creighton, M. J., Jamal, A. and Malancu, N. C. (2015) ‘Has Opposition to Immigration Increased in the US after the Economic Crisis? An Experimental Approach’. *International Migration Review* 49(3): 727–756.
- DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística) (2019) *Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda de 2018: Bogotá*.
- Flórez, J. M. (2020) ‘La pandemia cambia el sentido de la migración de regreso a Venezuela’. *El Tiempo*, 15 May 2020.
- Fossatti, L. and Uriarte, P. (2018) ‘Viviendo sin derecho. Migraciones latinoamericanas y acceso a la vivienda en Montevideo’. *La Rivada* 6(11): 42–60.
- Freitez, A. (2019) ‘Crisis humanitaria y migración forzada desde Venezuela’ in L. Gandini, F. L. Ascencio and V. Prieto (eds.) *Crisis y migración de población venezolana. Entre la desprotección y la seguridad jurídica en Latinoamérica*. UNAM: Ciudad de México. 33–57.
- Gandini, L., Prieto Rosas, V. and Lozano-Ascencio, F. (eds.) (2019) *El éxodo venezolano: migración en contextos de crisis y respuestas de los países latinoamericanos. Crisis y migración de población venezolana: entre la desprotección y la seguridad jurídica en Latinoamérica*. UNAM: Ciudad de México. 9–31.
- Glick Schiller, N. and Salazar, N. B. (2013) ‘Regimes of Mobility across the Globe’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(2): 183–200.
- Hatton, T. J. (2016) ‘Immigration, Public Opinion and the Recession in Europe’. *Economic Policy* 31(86): 205–246.
- Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2020) *Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide*. Human Rights Watch, New York. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide> [accessed 10 June 2020].
- IADB (2020) *DataMIG COVID19 Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo*. [WWW document]. URL <https://datamig.org/-/covid19> [accessed 9 June 2020].
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). (2018) *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios, PNAD Contínua. Estatísticas Sociais*. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/trabalho/17270-pnad-continua.html?=&ct=o-que> [accessed 01 June 2020].
- International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020a) *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work*, 3rd edn. Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743146.pdf.
- International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2020b) *ILOSTAT Explorer*. SDG Labour Market Indicators. Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer20/?lang=en&csegment=indicator&cid=SDG_B831_SEX_RT_A
- International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2020) *World Economic Outlook*. Washington, DC, International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) (2018) *Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda de 2017*. Instituto Nacional de Estadística: Santiago de Chile.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) (2020) *Encuesta Continua de Hogares 2019*. Instituto Nacional de Estadística: Montevideo.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC) (2019) *Encuesta Nacional de Empleo, Desempleo y Subempleo de 2019*. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos: Quito.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI) (2018) *Censo Nacional de Población de 2017*. Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática: Lima.
- Kanavos, P., Parkin, G. C., Kamphuis, B. and Gill, J. (2019) *Latin America Healthcare System Overview: A Comparative Analysis of Fiscal Space in Healthcare*. London: London

- School of Economics and Political Science. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/business-and-consultancy/consulting/assets/documents/latin-america-healthcare-system-overview-report-english.pdf>
- Laing, A. (2020) 'COVID Impasse: Bolivian and Peruvian Migrants Trapped at Chilean Border'. *Reuters*, 16 April 2020.
- Latinobarómetro (2020) Encuestas de opinión pública del Latinobarómetro: Ronda 2015. Latinobarómetro, Santiago de Chile.
- OCDE, CAF, CEPAL and Unión Europea (2019) *Perspectivas económicas de América Latina 2019: Desarrollo en Transición*. Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos (OCDE), CAF - Banco de Desarrollo de América Latina, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), Unión Europea (UE). Paris.
- United Nations (UN) (2020) *Los refugiados y migrantes venezolanos tienen cada vez más dificultades para sobrevivir en medio de la pandemia*. Noticias ONU. <https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/05/1474222>
- Ramírez, C. (2020) Discursos anti-inmigración y su posición privilegiada en los medios: una amenaza a la convivencia. Santiago: Centro de Investigación Periodística [WWW document]. URL <https://ciperchile.cl/2020/05/20/discursos-anti-inmigracion-y-su-posicion-privilegiada-en-los-medios-una-amenaza-a-la-convivencia/>
- Ratha, D. et al. (2019) *Data Release: Remittances to Low and Middle-Income Countries on Track to Reach \$551 Billion in 2019 and \$597 Billion by 2021*. World Bank: Washington, DC. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/data-release-remittances-low-and-middle-income-countries-track-reach-551-billion-2019>
- Serrano Pucci, F. M. and Vêras, M. (2019) 'Moradia provisória entre Bolivianos em São Paulo: ambiguidade e contingência'. *Caderno CRH* 32(87): 610–622.
- Simões, G. et al. (2017) *Perfil sociodemográfico e laboral da imigração venezuelana no Brasil*. Editora CRV: Curitiba.
- Vera Espinoza, M., Zapata, G. P. and Gandini, L. (2020) Mobility in Immobility: Latin American Migrants Trapped Amid COVID-19. Open Democracy: London. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/mobility-immobility-latin-american-migrants-trapped-amid-covid-19/>.
- Vera, F. and Adler, V. (2020) *Inmigrando: fortalecer ciudades destino*. Inter-American Development Bank: Buenos Aires. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0002267>
- World Food Programme (WFP) (2020) *Global Report on Food Crisis: Food Security Analysis (VAM)*. Rome: World Food Programme. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2020-global-report-food-crises>.
- Winter, B. (2020) 'The Explosive Politics of Migration'. *Americas Quarterly* 14(2): 28–31.
- World Bank (2020a) 'The Economy in the Time of Covid-19. The Chief Economist Office for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Macroeconomics' in *Trade and Investment Global Practice*. World Bank: Washington, DC.
- World Bank (2020b) *Global Economic Prospects, June 2020*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33748>.
- Zapata, G. P. and Prieto, V. (2020) La migración internacional y la protección de los derechos humanos de todas las personas migrantes. Documentos de difusión de las medidas prioritarias del Consenso de Montevideo. (in press) United Nations Population Fund.