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Venezuelan Emigration, Explained

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Why Are Venezuelans Fleeing?

The [collapse of the Venezuelan economy](#) and the [government crackdown](#) on the political opposition have been [well documented](#). Radical populist leader Hugo Chávez and his successor, President Nicolás Maduro, initially led a government with expansive and expensive social programs primarily funded by the country's vast oil reserves and the profits from state-run oil company PDVSA. When [oil prices fell](#) from \$112 to \$62 over a six-month period in 2014, the Venezuelan economy began to contract dramatically. Instead of making tough decisions to address revenue shortages and address the inefficiency and corruption of state enterprises, the Maduro regime began printing money to pay off its debts and provide for the welfare state. The resulting inflationary cycle has made the national currency, the bolívar, nearly worthless. The IMF projects that Venezuelan inflation will hit [1,000,000 percent inflation](#) by the end of 2018. To put that into perspective, the price of a café con leche has risen from 190,000 bolívares in April to over 2,000,000 bolívares today. Overall, forecasts project that the economy will [contract by double-digit percentages](#) this year for the third year in a row. Even recent efforts by the Maduro government to address inflation have been [largely panned](#) by outside observers.

The country's shrinking economy has exacted a high toll on the Venezuelan population. Reports indicate that the poverty rate is nearly [90 percent of the population](#). A 2017 national survey discovered 8 out of 10 Venezuelans have [reduced their food intake](#), and another found 78 percent of hospitals surveyed reported [shortages of medicine](#). In April

2018, the IMF placed the [unemployment rate](#) at 33.3 percent, up from 7.4 percent only three years prior; both of these figures likely underestimate the true number. In light of all these challenges, millions of Venezuelans have decided to leave the country. A [fourth quarter 2017 poll](#) conducted by Consultores 21, a Venezuelan polling firm, found that 40 percent of Venezuelans would like to leave the country, up 15 percent since first quarter 2015.

How Many Venezuelans Have Emigrated?

Accurate estimates are hard to come by and vary dramatically. Part of the problem is the difficulty in locating all of the migrants to count them. Colombia, for example, restricted access to many methods of legal immigration in February 2018, which has forced potential immigrants to find new illegal routes colloquially called *trochas* (literally, a trail or path). Naturally, this practice makes the numbers harder to track. Additionally, different countries and organizations will define the same population of migrants differently based on their status in the country, their reason for crossing the border, and the length they intend to stay in the country (ranging from less than a day to permanent). Venezuelan officials, meanwhile, continue to claim migration rates are “[normal](#),” and maintain that neighboring countries

are inflating numbers and forging images to solicit international intervention.

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Nevertheless, some reliable figures exist. The United Nations estimated that as of June 2018, [2.3 million people](#)—or 7 percent of the country’s population—have left Venezuela, with more than 1.6 million having fled [since 2015](#). Some 90 percent have remained in the region, with the majority in Colombia, Brazil, Peru,

and Ecuador. Colombia in June 2018 finished a [two-month-long registration](#), the Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos (Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants, or RAMV), of all Venezuelans in the country. The research documented over one million Venezuelans living in Colombia. Of those one million, approximately 442,462 are deemed “irregular immigrants” due to the crisis in Venezuela. RAMV also provides a window into the demographics of migrants. Equal numbers of men and women have emigrated. In total, 253,575 families crossed the border; 64 percent were families composed of one individual and another 31 percent had 2-4 members. Another 8,000 female immigrants were pregnant. Three hundred thirty-three identified as transgender. In terms of education, the vast majority, 291,000, had graduated high school, but only 70,000 had earned a higher degree. Meanwhile, only 3,326 immigrants held formal employment prior to leaving Venezuela, a mere 1 percent of reporting individuals. Finally, nearly all individuals intended to stay in Colombia for at least one year while events proceed in Venezuela. Out of the



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respondents, 369,506 intended to do so, along with another 26,088 planning a shorter stay. Thirty-eight thousand two hundred and fourteen planned to return to Venezuela, and for 8,654 individuals, Colombia was not the final destination.

In addition to Colombia, other countries neighboring Venezuela have reported high numbers of Venezuelan immigrants. Brazil tallied over [52,000 entries](#) from January 2017 through the first quarter of 2018. In one state along the border—Roraima—the [number of asylum requests](#) has exploded from around 4,000 in 2016 to 20,000 in the first four months of 2018. Additionally, it is not uncommon for migrants to transit Colombia and Brazil on their way to a final destination further south. Colombian officials estimate that [over 700,000 Venezuelans](#) have passed through Colombian territory on their way to Ecuador, Peru, and Chile. From January to August 2018, 423,000 migrants [crossed one bridge](#) between Colombia and Ecuador alone. According to Ecuador’s Foreign Ministry in August 2018, border crossings had reached [4,200 daily](#). In Peru, the number of immigrants has [ballooned](#) from 100,000 to 350,000 between March and June 2018.

How Have Countries Responded to the Migrant Inflow?

Individual country responses have differed. The immigration crisis is most acute in Colombia, where over one million people have arrived since the beginning of the crisis. The governments of former President Juan Manuel Santos and current President Iván Duque have experimented with a variety of responses to the influx. In 2017, the Santos government introduced a pass that would allow week-long visits for food or medical care, but then [ended the program](#) in February 2018 as part of a crackdown

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on immigration that also saw 3,000 more security personnel sent to the border. Colombia also stopped accepting applications for its temporary protection program in October 2017. However, in early August 2018, Colombia changed course, offering [all irregular Venezuelan](#) immigrants who registered with RAMV temporary protected status for up to two years. While this program is beneficial for regularizing the status of migrants, it also puts an extra strain on government resources and creates the potential for conflict with local populations. Forty-seven percent of immigrants [remain in the border departments](#), increasing a city's population as much as 23 percent, as occurred in the town of Villa del Rosario in Norte de Santander department. Meanwhile, [emergency room visits](#) grew sixteen times over between 2015 and 2017, putting an enormous strain on Colombia's public health system.

Brazil offers an illustrative case study of the multiple reactions to Venezuelan migration, in response to public opinion and other factors. In late August 2018, President Michel Temer [signed a decree](#) to send troops to the border area. This came after [unrest](#) between locals and immigrants in Roraima forced hundreds of immigrants back into Venezuela. Brazil's response has raised fears over the militarization of a civil process; in March 2018, the military was put in charge of administering [\\$54 million](#) allocated to deal with the humanitarian crisis. Brazil has also been applauded for its efforts to formalize the immigration process and register all immigrants crossing the border from Venezuela. Additionally, the government has promoted an "internalization" process to relocate migrants away from border areas in order to alleviate congestion. Although execution has been slow, efforts from Brasília to find suitable relocation for immigrants is a positive development.

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As significant numbers of migrants continued to make their way south, Peru and Ecuador were forced to respond. On August 9, 2018, the government of Ecuador declared a [state of emergency](#) in all of the northern states on the Colombian border. Then, on August 28, 2018, Peru declared its own [60-day state of emergency](#) in its two northern provinces, citing health and sanitation concerns. Threats by Colombian President Iván Duque to close the border caused a spike in migrant flows. Along with Peru, Ecuador also increased the [documentation requirements](#) to cross the border. To enter either country, Venezuelan immigrants were required to show a passport, a provision subsequently relaxed in light of the difficulty of acquiring passports in Venezuela. New restrictions raised concerns that more Venezuelans would be forced to cross the trochas between Venezuela and Colombia and Colombia and elsewhere illegally, exposing them to criminal activity and armed groups that flourish in border regions. Peru, meanwhile, established a [temporary protected status](#) for immigrants,

which allows them to live in the country, work, and have access to healthcare for one year.

A unified regional response to the migration has only recently come together. Ecuador hosted a two-day summit in Quito in September to draft a more unified approach. At the end of the summit, eleven nations—Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay—signed a [declaration](#) agreeing to [accept expired Venezuelan documents](#) such as passports and calling for [more international support](#). On the international level, both the United States and European Union have pledged financial assistance to neighboring countries to help deal with strained public finances. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development in August 2018, U.S. aid in the last two fiscal years totaled [\\$43 million](#). Witnessing the trends early in 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued an [appeal](#) in March 2018 for stepped-up support to address the migration crisis, a call [echoed](#) in subsequent months by the UNHCR and the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM). In September 2018, UN Secretary General António Guterres said that it was "[absolutely necessary](#)" to achieve a more coordinated international response to the refugee crisis. Former Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein was named [UN Joint Special Representative](#) for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants to oversee the international effort.

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