

DISCUSSION PAPER

Research on Child Migration and Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean

Understanding Evidence and Exploring Gaps

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I. 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 (LAC) Region in 2022, an estimated increase of 47% over 2021.¹ Indeed, increasing numbers of children migrating has been on the rise over the past few years, with children and families now representing an increasing proportion of migration flows as compared to single men, who formed the majority of flows five years ago. The number of children migrating unaccompanied and with their families are increasing proportionately, with the average age of children migrating decreasing.² Significant research has been conducted 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. Early research often treated children as mere extensions of their parents, later focus was on children traveling unaccompanied and only in recent years has research come to look at children's needs and perspectives both alone and in families.

Even where their needs are considered, too often children's own perspectives are ignored. However, the little research that has been conducted 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 used (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.

1. Paper Background and Key Objectives

Given these needs and gaps, the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy's Global Policy Centre and UNICEF Innocenti Global Office of Research and Foresight (Innocenti) convened a two day conference to discuss these issues. The conference, 'Research on Child Migration and Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Understanding and Applying Evidence and Exploring Gaps', convened 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 focused on testing and clarifying gaps identified in previous research reviews conducted by UNICEF, strategizing about future research needs and facilitating opportunities to foster new collaborative applications of, and deepen existing partnerships around, evidence-generation and action.

This paper reflects the framework for these discussions, as well as key outcomes. Building on two extensive reviews of available evidence, carried out by UNICEF's Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office (UNICEF LACRO) and by the UNICEF Innocenti, and consultation with practitioners about their priorities, this paper offers illustrative examples of the intersection of information, policy, and practice challenges. It is meant to highlight several 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 factors of decision-making around 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 can respond to these challenges. It goes on to discuss challenges in the destination country. Throughout, it discusses the unique challenges facing children, and where possible a gender perspective is included. The paper also addresses the extent of, or gaps in, evidence and analytical innovations.

II. Regional context: What are key migration pathways in the region?

Migration patterns and dynamics across the region are diverse. There are an estimated 9 million children in the LAC region living outside of their countries of origin.⁴ 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.

1. Venezuela

By March 2023, 7.3 million people had left Venezuela, of which at least 6.1 million are registered as refugees elsewhere in South America.⁵ Although the largest number of Venezuelans (2.5 million) have gone to neighbouring Colombia, increasing numbers are migrating further South. Peru now hosts 1.5 million Venezuelans and others are heading further south to Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina, or east to Brazil.⁶

4 Regional context: What are key migration pathways in the region?

In recent years, the number of children among this population has increased.⁷ 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.⁸

2. Central America 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 2011.⁹ In FY22 US Border Patrol encountered 584,833 individuals from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala at the border.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ To some extent, we are able to identify these trends because US Customs and Border Patrol makes data, disaggregated by nationality and also by other demographic markers such as a child traveling alone or a family, available.¹² Honduras and Panama also make some data about border encounters available.¹³

The US has traditionally been the dominant destination for migrants from across the LAC region and Mexican and Central Americans in particular. Although there are a number of other destinations, including Mexico and Costa Rica among others, in 2020, International Organization for Migration (IOM) still called the dominance of the US as a destination the 'most striking feature of the main migration corridors' in the LAC region.¹⁴

Children form a significant portion of this population. In fiscal year 2022, 21% of Central Americans encountered by US border authorities were unaccompanied minors.¹⁵ Children are uniquely vulnerable to the gang violence and poverty that drive movement from the region.¹⁶

3. 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Precise numbers of children in the population are not available, but in 2021, IOM statistics indicated that 18.7 percent of returned Haitian migrants, most of whom had left Haiti and attempted to enter the US in the prior three months were children, indicating that they make up a significant portion of the population.¹⁹ A significant number of children in this population were born abroad and may not have the same nationality as their parents.²⁰

4. 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.²¹ Mexico is increasingly becoming a destination for Central Americans and others.²² Within Central America people from Panama and Nicaragua to Costa Rica and from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to Belize.²³ The numbers of African and other extra-regional migrants moving through the region are increasing.²⁴

5. Internal migration and displacement

There is also wide scale internal migration in the region, although these movements do not get the same attention as international movements. These movements follow a wide variety of patterns, some move seeking work or educational opportunities, often from rural to urban areas (Central America for example is rapidly urbanizing), some seek to reunite with family members, some move because of violence and natural disasters. These movements can be substantial, often larger than international movements. For example, in Mexico between 2015 and 2020, 847,967 international migrants were registered while 3.8 million moved internally.²⁵

Natural disasters and climatic conditions also displace large numbers. For example, between 2000 and 2017 an estimated 6.4 million Brazilians were displaced by natural disasters, and between 2014 and 2018, 3.4 million were displaced in the eastern Caribbean due to storms and flooding.²⁶

Of those displaced by war and violence, the most prominent case is Colombia where Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (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,²⁷ including 709,211 who have been displaced since 2016.²⁸ Other significant areas of conflict-induced internal displacement according to IDMC are El Salvador (175,000), Honduras (247,000), Guatemala (243,000) and Mexico (379,000).²⁹ 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 2016,³⁰ significantly lower than estimate of IDMC (175,000).

Information about the situation of children who move internally is far less available than it is for migrant or refugee children.³¹ In many cases, age disaggregated statistics are not available. However, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) includes this information in monitoring of displacement in Haiti.³² A study by IDMC in Colombia, although it did not survey the entire population, indicated that the proportion of children in displaced communities was high (49%), higher than that of the host or overall national population.³³

6. The Darien gap – one of the world’s most dangerous crossings

Although many border crossings in the region are dangerous, particularly where the crossing is illicit, the Darien Gap is one of the most dangerous. It is a 100 km area filled with dense jungle and has been home to militants and drug traffickers.³⁴ These traffickers at times attack and rob migrants. Migrants may also be vulnerable to repression on the Colombian side of the border before they leave on the journey and shipwreck, wild animals, including snakes, exposure, and drowning during it. 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.³⁵ Some describe witnessing sexual violence and suffering from lack of medical care.³⁶ 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.³⁷ Between January and May 2023, 166,649 crossings were registered,³⁸ on track to be another record setting year. Between 2021 and 2022, children constituted 20% of the migrant population, a fourfold increase in the absolute number of children crossing.³⁹

Migrants from a wide variety of countries use the passage. This diversity of countries creates challenges for responses because of the wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds of migrants and diversity in their needs. In 2019, there were about a dozen nationalities encountered at the Darien, if you look at the data today there are over 140.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ In March 2023, Venezuelans constituted 55% of all border crossings. 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.⁴² Another set of response efforts focus on ensuring appropriate reception of migrants on the Panamanian side, where is a reception centre.⁴³

A number of efforts are being made to track available data about this crossing. The Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V) monitors data related to outflows from Colombia towards the gap, including records of maritime transport companies in Necoclí⁴⁴ 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 form of early warning around the likely number and trajectory of migrants heading towards the US⁴⁵ and is published on the internet.⁴⁶ Journalists have depicted the stories of some of these migrants,⁴⁷ and humanitarian actors have called for more aid to the area.

Although humanitarian actors have access to gender and age data, the data which is made available on the internet largely lacks these and other demographic details that would be critical for academic analysis.⁴⁸ There seems to be little comprehensive analysis of these migration trends over time. No academic analyses produced using Panamanian data to examine regional variations and establish causal patterns were found, whereas a number of analyses of US border apprehension data were found.

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.⁴⁹ There are still open questions about why people are moving through this particular channel.

7. Other high-risk areas

Other areas of vulnerability are trochas, or unofficial border points between Venezuela and neighbouring countries which are often controlled by armed and/or criminal groups. Reports indicate that physical and sexual violence and extortion are particularly common there.⁵⁰ Mexico is also both difficult and dangerous to cross. Estimates suggest 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, particularly in Mexico's southern states.⁵¹

8. 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 IDMC, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the IOM DTM. 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 conduct 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. More recently, UNICEF has tested a new framework for research in the creation of a chatbot that provides information about services, and gathers information about who is on the move and their trajectories. However, all types of movement are not equally well documented. Some factors that play a role in determining the availability of information are:

- **The size of the population,**
- **The nature of their movement** (there tends to be more focus on those who enter without formal documentation out of interest in controlling such movements, and because such populations tend to be vulnerable),⁵² 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.

III. Making the decision to migrate

Migration in the region, as elsewhere in the world, is influenced by a variety of factors, including political instability, violence (including both war, gang violence/organized crime), gender discrimination/domestic violence, racism and xenophobia, economic hardship and poverty, family reunification, climate shocks and natural disasters, cultural imaginings about the destination, and state inaction or repression among others. Significant research has been done to understand these drivers, but the relative weight of various factors, the role of changing climatic patterns and the perspectives of children on these movements are less well understood.

These understandings 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.

1. 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.

Children are uniquely vulnerable to violence in situations of instability in LAC. Throughout the region, 10% of all children and adolescent deaths is a result of homicide, which makes homicide the leading cause of death for those aged 10-19. The five countries globally with the highest rates of child homicides are all in the region, including Venezuela, El Salvador, and Honduras.⁵³ This is in part driven by the fact that children can be targets of forced recruitment by rebel and paramilitary groups⁵⁴ and criminal gangs.⁵⁵ In Central America, children are particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment and related violence. Very high homicide rates in Central America⁵⁶ disproportionately affects adolescents. In Honduras, adolescent boys are more likely to die from homicide than all other causes combined.⁵⁷ In El Salvador, teenagers represent 27% of all homicide victims.⁵⁸ In Guatemala, young people 15-24 are twice as likely as the general population to be murdered.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ Such actions can increase the public association of youth with criminality, which can undermine their economic prospects and undermine trust in the authorities.⁶¹

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 mentioned having experienced domestic violence.⁶² However, the sensitivity of the issue and the reluctance of children to speak about it makes it difficult to research.⁶³

2. 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.⁶⁴ Migrants from Venezuela often cite serious shortages of food and medicine.⁶⁵

Throughout the region, children are more likely to be poor and efforts to eradicate poverty have made less progress with children than others.⁶⁶ In Guatemala, for example, 70% of children under 10 live in poverty,⁶⁷ as compared to 59.3% of all Guatemalans.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.

3. 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.⁷¹ Similarly, in the Dominican Republic family reunification was the most cited reason for moving.⁷²

In some cases, children travel to join parents who migrated earlier with a view to settling and facilitating integration.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

The policy frameworks for family reunification can have important impact. Research among Venezuelan⁷⁵ and Honduran refugees and migrants shows that if legal options are not available, individuals are likely to migrate irregularly and/or engage smugglers.⁷⁶ However, efforts to facilitate family reunification in Ecuador⁷⁷ and Bolivia have not yet been assessed.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

4. Climate shocks

Climate change is also increasingly discussed as a factor in migration decisions and its impact is predicted to increase over the coming century.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ Since 2014, there have been 'levels of food insecurity [that] have not been previously seen in the region.'⁸²

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 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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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 IDMC'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 cannot be prevented.⁸⁵

5. 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 US remains the main destination, it is not the only one.⁸⁶

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 gangs⁸⁷ 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)⁸⁸ or diverting Venezuelans from Ecuador, to Peru and Colombia. Other research, however, indicates that it is the status, not the number which is impacted.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ Of particular relevance for children are family reunification policies, many of whose impact has not yet been assessed.

IV. 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*, which attempted to shed light on the rights violations associated with migration in the region.⁹¹

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,⁹² while others, the End Immigration Detention of Children coalition advocate on issues such as ending the detention of children.⁹³ International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s innovative new project, Signpost, also covers several countries in the region, and seeks to provide assistance and collect data at the same time. IRC chatbot that can be loaded on mobile phones provides data about available services but also analyses queries over time to gain information about needs and movement patterns.⁹⁴

1. 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.⁹⁵ Bolivians are also documented to use smugglers to enter Brazil and to facilitate connections to work there.⁹⁶ There also appear to be specialized networks that cater to children. Haitians use smugglers to move children across the Dominican border.⁹⁷ 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,⁹⁸ which can cause significant hardship. In some cases, children are engaged as assistants to this smuggling, in order to complete their own journeys. Some participatory research has been conducted with these groups.⁹⁹ Although in some cases smugglers are seen as having a protective impact, smugglers can also expose migrants to abuse, abandonment in dangerous areas, kidnapping, extortion physical and sexual assault, torture, or even death.¹⁰⁰ 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 opposing smuggling. There is a good amount of research about smugglers, but little of it focuses on children.¹⁰¹ Greater engagement between researchers that document these impacts and policy makers could facilitate the creation of more protective policies.

2. 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.¹⁰² There have also been reports of Venezuelan women and girls being lured into sexual slavery.¹⁰³ However, although areas of high risk are described, there is little detailed information about the incidence of trafficking and individual experiences,¹⁰⁴ in part perhaps because of obstacles to disclosure on the part of victims.

3. Detention

Although many countries in the region have abolished immigration detention, it remains a risk for migrating children. As a general principle, detention of children should not be, an option as no custodial measures should be made. Some countries, such as Panama, have prohibited the detention of children in migration proceedings. Few, however, have developed sufficient policy and practice around non-custodial measures.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ Others have adopted detention policies, 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.¹⁰⁷ The US continues to detain large numbers of children on the southern border, with an estimated 122,000 migrant children taken into detention in FY21.¹⁰⁸

The negative impacts of detention on children are well documented,¹⁰⁹ 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.

4. 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 dangers frequently encountered when pursuing non-legal pathways of irregular migration and smuggling. However, children in contexts of high migration often have a good deal of information prior to awareness raising interventions,¹¹⁰ calling into question the effectiveness of these interventions. In addition, there has been little evaluation of such efforts.¹¹¹ The prominence of these approaches also shows a neglect of alternative approaches to engage in safe migration, which should both be further studied and also developed programmatically.

Another response has been to offer reception centres which at times offer short term accommodation alongside other services including legal information, hygiene, and referrals. 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, service providers offer children accommodation. 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.¹¹²

In addition to these responses, a variety of institutions not particularly focused on migrant children respond to the needs of child migrants. This could include, for example, social workers responding to cases of abuse as they would for a non-migrant child or a migrant child enrolling in a local school. Participants noted that ensuring that such institutions track and disaggregate data related to migrant children could be useful in identifying, and responding to, specific vulnerabilities of migrant children or challenges faced by these bodies in responding to migrant as compared to non-migrant children.

V. 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 Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, many of whom been rendered stateless by a series of actions, including a 2013 Supreme Court decision which ruled that only persons born in the Dominican Republic to citizens or legal residents are Dominican.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶

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 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.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere in the region, for example in the US or in Brazil,¹¹⁸ nationality is extended to anyone born on the territory, but there may be practical difficulties in obtaining the necessary documentation.¹¹⁹

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 that those who do not.¹²⁰ In 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.¹²¹ 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,¹²² a recent evidence review concluded that ‘no studies provide empirical evidence’ that regularization of parents leads to better outcomes for children.¹²³

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. In Mexico and the US, deportations increased from 2020 to 2021.¹²⁴

One pathway to legal 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.¹²⁵ 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 0.6 percent of children in the program have been granted any type of relief. 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.¹²⁶

An additional mechanism for accessing protection is ‘Temporary Protected Status’, which is a designation that allows the US government to designate whole countries as inappropriate for return – either because of danger or destruction of infrastructure. Any national of a designated country designated can apply and access the status with few exceptions. The status is, however, is temporary and can be removed when conditions in the home country improve. The status was created in response to El Salvador’s civil war and has been used for several other LAC countries, including Honduras, Haiti, and Venezuela.¹²⁷

In general, there is significant evidence that those without identity documentation or legal status are more vulnerable and that access to documentation is a critical element of accessing rights. However, less data is available on the impact of programming intended to address this issue. A recent evidence review concluded that there was little ‘evidence on the effectiveness of legal assistance and documentation support activities.’¹²⁸ 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.

VI. Gaps in the data and discussion questions

Below are several key themes discussed at the workshop.

1. Overarching themes

- **Migration is a complex phenomenon** with multiple causes, dimensions, and effects. In this context, how can interdisciplinary approaches drawing upon anthropology, sociology geology, history, law, humanities, behavioural sciences, and data sciences be used to advance our understanding?
- **How can we address gaps in research** on a regional/country basis to ensure that there are not gaps in our understanding?

2. 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?
 - How can we better understand whether nationality-based responses, like R4V, are more appropriate, and where should we consider other mechanisms?
 - 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)?
 - Can we look more at the impact of temporary migration statuses? What happens when these statuses end?
- **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?
- **How can we better understand the actors** who need to be influenced to achieve change and better understand what evidence is needed to alter their positions? Is it even about evidence at all?

3. 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 challenges?
- **What good practices exist** 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)?
- **How can we refocus the debate** on durable solutions? Can we think about options outside of the traditional asylum model, recognizing that many of these children are unlikely to qualify for asylum?
- **Can we better understand how available** civil registration systems are and the role that these play in access to other immigration statuses?

4. 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? What data is 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 can we use existing and emerging technology** to generate data? For example, chatbots could be used to generate data on satisfaction with services. These new technologies, however, can raise new challenges with regard to data protection and respect for privacy. How can we resolve these?
- **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** be better developed and used? For example, can it help us to better assess policies in a gender and age-sensitive way?
- **How can we ensure that data** generated is acted upon in a positive way?

VII. Conclusion and workshop summary

As this paper shows, there is rich information available on the situation of migrant children in the LAC region, but 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.

The workshop discussed ways in which practitioner-academic collaboration could be reinforced by UNICEF, drawing from highly engaged exchanges between participants from both practice and academia. In particular, UNICEF and academics academic colleagues explored practical opportunities for seeking co-funding of child migration evidence projects of value to UNICEF LACRO. A key point of this discussion was exploring ways in which both actors can more effectively communicate to ensure that academics know about and apply for UNICEF research opportunities. A number of practical modalities, including ensuring academics were aware of and able to access UNICEF calls for proposals were discussed.

The workshop also raised questions about how data gathering and management of protection systems could be improved. There has been a tendency to use information about children who are encountered through the migration system, but the reality is that not all children who are on the move engage with these systems, and this is a population that is missing from the data. Improving protection systems and gathering data from them could be an important check on the availability of this data.

Participants expressed interest in new research methodologies, such as the chatbot model mentioned above, along with the need to address unresolved ethical questions associated with innovative emerging data collection and analysis methodologies.

In addition to the opportunity for knowledge sharing and evidence needs identification and prioritization, the discussions over both days of the workshop generated significant engagement and intellectual curiosity between participants. Key areas around which there is appetite and opportunity for future research were identified as follows:

- 1. A need for political economy analysis**, in particular around analysis aimed at building better understanding of illicit smuggling and trafficking economies and their incentive structures. There was also an interest in bureaucratic political economy, examining how governments make policies, and how competing interests political, economic, and cultural drive migration policies and how UNICEF can influence these.
- 2. Engaging with policy and policy influence as a subject of study in itself.** What do we know works for addressing policy and changing the behavior of states? What is the effectiveness of deterrence strategies? Is it possible to manage how movements happen by adjusting legal pathways, and if so, how? Each of those questions opens up applications for a wide range of social science and applied research. The possibility of expanding further to explore other methodological approaches, for instance media studies, semiotics, and organizational sociology could be utilized to understand more about the issues. Academic and practitioner can work together to create conceptual frameworks that can produce sharp, actionable programmatic, policy and advocacy recommendations.
- 3. Innovative uses of data, data analytics methods, and data partnerships** to generate actionable, detailed, and age-disaggregated real or near real time information on mixed migration trends in the region. One key challenge acknowledged was that the patterns of migration are changing quickly, but the mechanisms for gathering and sharing data are often slow, so we may be working for example with data released by national statistical agencies that are several years old. There was also interest in using modeling and predictive analytics and other approaches to improve anticipatory planning and preparedness. Although these are valuable, it was recognized that even the best models rely on data and poor data will result in poor predictions. So, there is a need for researchers and UNICEF to collaboratively address gaps in the quality and availability of data. In particular, the need for more disaggregated data, better demographic data including by age, gender, intersecting vulnerability profiles such disability and connection with violent armed groups. A recent study by R4V highlights the intersecting vulnerabilities of separated and unaccompanied Venezuelan children in the region to armed groups and organized crime lays out some of the key contours of this vulnerability, but also acknowledges the need for additional analysis, understand and updating to clarify the magnitude of such risks and any changing patterns.¹²⁹ We also need disaggregation within nationalities by flow to understand different flows from the same country of origin but along different routes along different periods of time.
- 4. Rethinking migration through the perspective of children young people and their families themselves.** That means consulting with the voices of children using both surveys but also deep ethnographic qualitative research to understand their subjective experiences. This is important both because it honors UNICEF's commitment to enabling meaningful child participation as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of Child and because children disrupt and challenge our reductionist legal categories and definitions and we need to be challenged because programs fail when our technocratic categories do not match empirical reality, for example where people don't consider themselves refugees. To create better frames, we need to listen to children themselves.

5. **A call for more operations research** to better evaluate, grounding and increase the credibility of promising solutions that offer opportunities for scale. One tool for this could be more impact evaluation and then advancing interventions that are evidence-based and translating these experiences into the development of concrete guidance.

6. **Prioritizing climate change and climate-driven migration** as a subject of study and analysis, including alignment of meteorological and migration data sources, understanding the complex interrelations between climate, weather, and migration decision-making, and introducing greater trend forecasting and foresight analysis of the ways in which climate change will shape migration in LAC in the near and mid-term future. It was also noted that a regional climate migration evidence agenda can feed into UNICEF's planned 2024 global climate migration summit, being led by Programme Group, Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, and Innocenti.

7. **A number of other areas were identified** that fit less well into these broad categories. These include:
 - Embracing greater creativity in terms of methodologies and disciplines, including the need more longitudinal research to understand migration over time.
 - Understanding processing centers better and problematizing them drawing from critical academic perspectives.
 - The household as a unit of analysis needs to be better understood. That means going beyond understanding individual migration decision making and recognizing that migration decision making happens in a collective and often contested way within the household and can impact decisions about whether the family splits or migrates together. Behavioral science tools can be useful in this effort and help to model and understand behavior. This could help us to understand the increasing migration of families as compared to individuals.
 - Approaching critically where new research is needed, and where what is needed instead is rather the management and curation of existing research, including through systematic evidence reviews, gap mapping, and just reading the existing material and not duplicating efforts.

In conclusion of the session, we returned the core objectives which were about knowledge sharing, gap identification and identifying opportunities for partnership. Participants agreed that the workshop should be a departure point for deeper sustained collaboration going forward between LACRO, Innocenti, and knowledge partners in attendance.

To this end, discussions concluded with suggestions about how collaboration among the network of participants convened for this workshop could continue. The idea of creating a regional research hub was discussed for the future, but in the meantime a light, agile and informal collaboration at the technical level was suggested, facilitated, and supported by Innocenti. It was also noted that the conversation around how evidence generation fits in terms of other priorities. The need to ensure connections and conversations around new funding prospects was also discussed.

Participants

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