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Latin American migration in the age of Covid-19

Where the UK meets Latin American & Iberia

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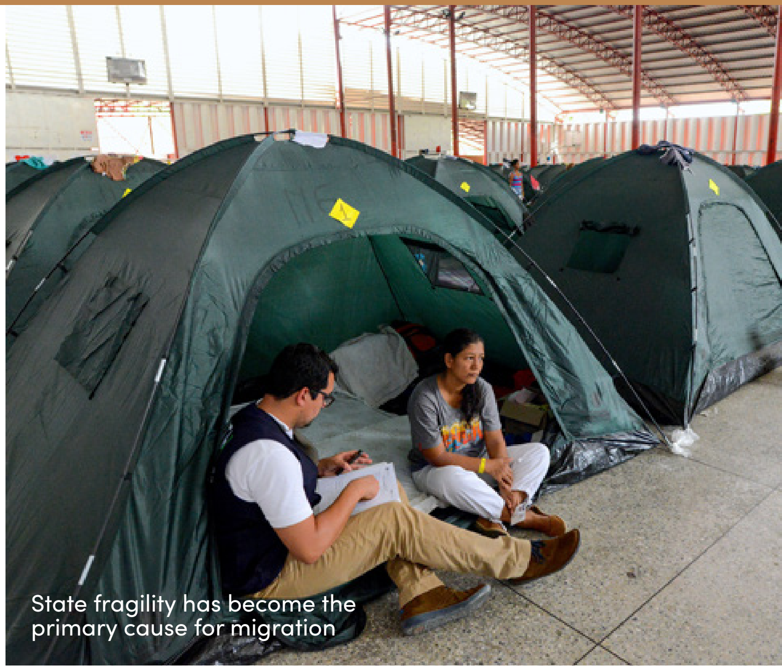
Executive summary

- In recent years, the dominating 'push' factor behind outmigration from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has been state fragility.
- The proportion of LAC migrants originating from a selection of nine fragile or unstable countries (see Table 1) jumped from 30% in 2010 to 40% in 2019, with over 60% of this increase (3.9m) coming from Venezuela.
- It was the recession following the 2008/09 global financial crisis that significantly increased the pressures to migrate in many of these fragile states, but now Latin America faces a potentially even greater economic downturn and, with it, a likely increasing of the pressures on vulnerable populations to migrate away from fragile states.
- Among the likely economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is a potentially serious drop in remittances, which are of huge importance to some LAC economies. For all of the LAC, remittances represent 1.9% of GDP; for El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti it is over 20%.
- But just as growing economic pressures will increase the motivation to migrate, restrictions on international mobility, economic difficulties and rising unemployment in the main receiving countries, and growing anti-immigration sentiment will act as an impediment.
- What happens in the US will have by far the biggest impact on Latin America. In 2019, of the 50.6m foreign-born migrants in the US, at least 21m were from Mexico and Central and South America, which in turn is 60% of the outmigration total from these countries.
- Although Europe is a much less important destination for Latin American migrants, being home to only 4.5m in 2019 (of which 2.23m are in Spain), impediments to immigration in Europe are also likely to grow as economies contract.
- The end result, increasing pressures to migrate but diminishing opportunities, is likely to be profoundly challenging for the weaker states of Latin America and the Caribbean.

A change in dynamics



State fragility has become the primary cause for migration

The January 2019 Canning House report on migration highlighted both an increasing trend in migration from the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and a shift in the dynamics behind this outmigration. Noting a 60% increase in LAC migrants living outside their countries of origin between 2000 and 2017, the report also highlighted that "a significant part of the rise in migration is coming from a handful of countries, many of which face (or have faced) severe political and/or development challenges".

Table 1 below illustrates the point that there has been a continuing and significant increase in the exodus over the past 20 years, with nearly 40m LAC migrants living beyond their countries of origin in 2019, giving an increase since 2000 of 76%.

As Table 1 shows, the year-on-year growth in outmigration from the nine selected countries in the 10 years from 1990 to 2000 was 2.5%, while the year-on-year growth in outmigration for the rest of LAC was 6.6%. This position, however, is reversed in the latest period, from 2010-2019, when the year-on-year growth in outmigration from the selected countries increased to 5.7% while the growth rate for the rest of the LAC fell to 0.5%.

This increase in outmigration from the selected countries reflects a shift in the balance of forces motivating migration, from the pull factors associated with the global demand for low-skilled labour in the years leading up to the turn of the century to the push factors associated with state fragility which were exacerbated by the fall-out from the 2009 global recession.

This shift in motivating forces is reflected in the slowing of outmigration from Mexico (a primary source of cheap imported labour for the US) during the period under review. Mexico is still by far the largest emigration country in Latin America and the Caribbean (see Table 2), with some 12.4m Mexicans living outside Mexico during 2019. However, there was a marked slowing in migration from Mexico to the US from about the year 2000. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of Mexicans living in the US went from 4.3m to 9.4m, an increase of 5.1m. In the next 10 years, the increase was 2.8m, taking the total to 12.2m in 2010, since when there has been a decrease to 11.5m.

Table 1: Latin American and Caribbean cumulative outmigration, 1990-2019

Countries	1990	2000	2005	2010	2019
Colombia	1,009,935	1,436,444	1,887,924	2,526,525	2,869,032
Cuba	835,796	1,049,761	1,162,586	1,313,321	1,654,684
El Salvador	1,242,075	949,270	1,119,319	1,337,458	1,600,739
Guatemala	348,332	583,020	737,106	925,252	1,205,644
Guyana	233,731	363,434	393,980	439,451	520,196
Haiti	528,873	805,430	972,717	1,123,759	1,585,681
Honduras	156,594	342,337	449,303	587,886	800,707
Nicaragua	442,126	502,243	436,780	610,902	740,000
Venezuela, RB	185,946	319,240	438,692	558,491	4,500,000
Total Fragile/Unstable Countries	4,983,408	6,351,179	7,598,407	9,423,045	15,476,683
Other LAC	8,288,134	15,759,441	19,004,053	22,328,699	23,441,985
Total LAC	13,271,542	22,110,620	26,602,460	31,751,744	38,918,668
Fragile as a % of total	38%	29%	29%	30%	40%
Fragile states y-on-y growth		2.50%	3.70%	4.40%	5.70%
Other LAC y-on-y growth		6.60%	3.80%	3.30%	0.50%

Source: *UN DESA, 2020*

The effects of the global recession

It was the global recession of 2009 and its aftermath that exacerbated political instability in the most vulnerable countries as governments struggled to deliver on social demands or to handle the pressures from transnational crime networks. Political tensions in many countries affected by the recession increased the pressure on people to migrate.

However, a recent study of the main reasons driving migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – the so-called Northern Triangle – reveals a more nuanced matrix of motivations than just state fragility and insecurity.

The February 2019 study by Creative Associates, named *Saliendo Adelante*, researched the factors motivating migration in 60 municipalities that account for more than half of the region's emigration. The survey found that 24% in the relevant municipalities in El Salvador had the intention to migrate, 18% in Guatemala, and 33% in Honduras. Of these, 50% in El Salvador, 71% in Guatemala, and 67% in Honduras cited economic concerns as their primary motivation for migration.

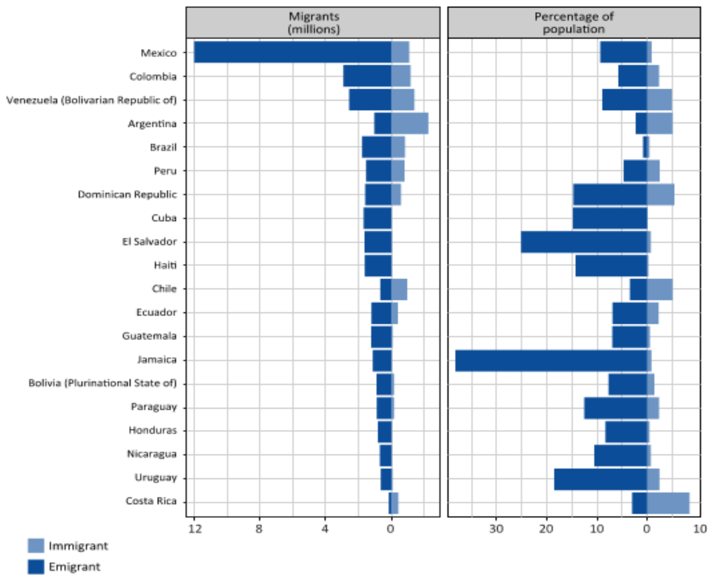
When it came to what *Saliendo Adelante* terms "victimisation" (that is close personal exposure to homicide, robbery, or extortion), the percentage of those who intend to migrate who cited this as their primary motivation was rather less than those who cited economic factors, namely 38% in El Salvador, 14% in Guatemala, and 18% in Honduras.

However, it is perhaps notable that 86% of the total registered extortions in Honduras in 2017 occurred in the high-migration municipalities (which are home to less than 60% of the total population). And it is incontestable, as Table 3 shows, that El Salvador (52.0 per 100,000 population) and Honduras (38.9) have the highest homicide rates in the LAC, and Guatemala's rate (22.5) is exceeded only by Brazil (27.4), Mexico (29.1), and Colombia (25.3).

Another important motivating factor is the existence of transnational ties. The survey found that nearly a quarter of those in the Northern Triangle's high-migration municipalities who said they have thought of migrating receive remittances. The report also notes: "The statistical significance of remittances is greatest in Guatemala where receiving remittances makes an individual nearly twice as likely to have thought about migrating."

Finally, population growth (which in poor states can be a strong 'push' factor for emigration) was also significant, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala whose populations grew by 23% and 20% respectively from 2009-2019.

Table 2: Top 20 Latin American and Caribbean migrant countries in 2019



Source: UN DESA, 2019a.

Note 1: The population size used to calculate the percentage of immigrants and emigrants is based on the UN DESA total resident population of the country, which includes foreign-born populations.

Note 2: "Immigrant" refers to foreign-born migrants residing in the country. "Emigrant" refers to people born in the country who were residing outside their country of birth in 2019.

Table 3: Rates of intentional homicide in selected LAC countries (per 100,000 population)

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018
Bolivia	6.2	6.2		
Brazil	28.6	29.9	30.8	27.4
Chile	3.4	3.4	4.2	4.4
Colombia	26.9	25.7	25.0	25.3
Costa Rica	11.5	11.8	12.2	11.3
Cuba	5.5	5.0		
Dominican Republic		15.5	11.6	10.0
Ecuador	6.5	5.8	5.8	5.8
El Salvador	105.2	83.0	61.7	52.0
Guatemala	29.4	27.3	26.1	22.5
Guyana	19.4	18.4	14.8	14.2
Haiti	10.0	9.5		6.7
Honduras	56.5	55.6	41.0	38.9
Mexico	17.0	19.9	25.7	29.1
Nicaragua	8.4	7.2		
Panama	11.9	10.0	9.7	9.4
Paraguay	9.2	9.9	7.9	7.1
Peru	7.4	7.9	7.9	
Suriname	6.1	7.3	5.4	
Uruguay	8.6	7.8	8.3	12.1

Source: *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*

Intra-regional migration

Another significant phenomenon has been the increase of intra-regional migration as illustrated in Table 5 below. Among the factors at work here have been the internal conflict in Colombia, the economic collapse of Venezuela, and the pressures on Mexico to reduce onward migration to the US from the rest of Latin America. The International Organization for Migration also points to disparities between economic and labour opportunities within the region, with Argentina, Chile, and Brazil in particular attracting migrants from the Andean countries and Paraguay.

With regard to the special case of Venezuela, by 2020 there were 5.7m displaced Venezuelans, with the majority (as illustrated in Table 4) living within the region, including over 2m in Colombia and nearly 1m in Peru.

Table 4: Venezuelan migration (cumulative)

	Venezuelan migrants		
	2018	**2019**	**2020**
Costa Rica	36,000	40,000	44,000
Panama	80,000	88,000	97,000
Colombia	870,000	1,400,000	2,009,000
Ecuador	200,000	330,000	659,000
Peru	700,000	861,000	978,000
Brazil	50,000	212,000	361,000
Chile	85,000	370,000	472,000
United States	434,000	447,000	460,000
Spain	203,000	270,000	297,000
Rest of world	579,000	481,000	324,000
Total	3,237,000	4,449,000	5,701,000

Source: *Manuel Orozco.*

Table 5: LAC intra-regional migrants at mid-year by region and country, 1990-2019

	1990	**1995**	**2000**	**2005**	**2010**	**2015**	**2019**
LAC	7,161,371	6,688,710	6,570,729	7,224,942	8,262,433	9,441,679	11,673,288
Caribbean	1,056,483	1,148,720	1,247,863	1,311,361	1,326,879	1,489,916	1,524,793
Selected Caribbean:							
Cuba	34,555	26,187	17,818	11,935	6,640	5,312	4,886
Dominican Republic	291,151	323,381	355,611	376,001	393,720	549,289	567,648
Haiti	19,084	18,129	17,222	16,360	17,178	18,036	18,756
Central America	1,829,911	1,298,916	1,107,577	1,385,713	1,749,940	1,878,860	1,927,688
Belize	30,404	33,446	36,488	41,424	46,360	54,674	59,998
Costa Rica	417,628	364,287	310,946	358,175	405,404	411,697	417,768
El Salvador	47,360	39,537	31,713	36,019	40,324	42,045	42,617
Guatemala	264,257	156,188	48,119	57,252	66,384	78,352	80,421
Honduras	270,423	149,442	28,461	27,875	27,288	38,317	38,933
Mexico	695,674	458,549	538,051	712,487	969,538	1,028,803	1,060,707
Nicaragua	41,421	26,619	30,389	34,918	37,333	40,262	42,172
Panama	62,744	70,848	83,410	117,563	157,309	184,710	185,072
South America	4,274,977	4,241,074	4,215,289	4,527,868	5,185,614	6,072,903	8,220,807
Argentina	1,649,919	1,595,069	1,540,219	1,673,088	1,805,957	2,086,302	2,212,879
Bolivia	73,758	83,598	92,658	107,745	122,846	142,989	156,114
Brazil	798,517	741,557	684,596	638,582	592,568	716,568	807,006
Chile	107,501	142,417	177,332	276,360	375,388	639,724	939,992
Colombia	104,277	106,943	109,609	107,612	124,271	139,134	1,142,319
Ecuador	78,663	115,093	151,523	187,404	325,366	387,513	381,507
Falkland Islands	855	868	1,067	1,166	1,436	1,571	1,902
French Guiana	63,612	70,131	76,649	86,468	96,288	106,108	117,372
Guyana	4,095	6,352	8,610	10,868	13,126	15,384	15,699
Paraguay	195,884	186,570	176,608	168,243	160,299	156,462	160,519
Peru	56,688	56,732	66,300	77,877	104,706	154,774	782,169
Suriname	18,083	22,320	27,506	33,664	39,713	43,127	46,157
Uruguay	98,116	93,428	88,874	82,317	76,303	78,799	81,482
Venezuela	1,025,009	1,019,996	1,013,738	1,076,474	1,347,347	1,404,448	1,375,690

Source: *UN DESA, 2020*

Table 6: Migrants from Mexico, Central and South America by region, 2019

DESTINATION COUNTRIES/REGIONS	From Mexico, Central & South America
WORLD	**35,542,476**
Africa	23,418
Asia	424,497
Latin America and the Caribbean	7,984,188 *
Oceania	191,234
EUROPE AND NORTHERN AMERICA	**26,919,139**
Of which:	
EUROPE	4,490,979
Eastern Europe	12,486
Northern Europe	490,645
Denmark	19,266
Ireland	12,991
Norway	29,780
Sweden	83,998
United Kingdom	334,083
Southern Europe	3,006,714
Greece	6,560
Italy	603,753
Spain	2,227,837
Western Europe	981,134
Austria	23,360
Belgium	58,086
France	294,406
Germany	196,702
Luxembourg	6,386
Netherlands	271,145
Switzerland	130,667
NORTHERN AMERICA	**22,428,160**
Canada	780,009
United States of America	21,309,962

* Note: The figure for Latin America is less than that shown in Table 4 as it excludes migrants from the Caribbean and uses a much smaller estimate for Venezuelan intra-regional migrants.

Source: *UN DESA*

Not just America

Although North America (with 22.4m) is by far the most important destination for Latin American migrants, followed a distant second by intra-regional migration (7.9m on the UN's 2019 figures in Table 6, but now considerably more due to the continuing Venezuelan exodus), there are also large numbers of Latin American migrants in Europe, with a total in 2019 of 4.9m (not including the Caribbean).

As Table 6 shows, the most important destination is, not surprisingly, Spain, with 2.2m Latin American migrants in 2019. Even this, however, is only 10% of the number in the United States. In recent years, the UK has seen an increase in migration from Latin America, but the 2019 figure of 334,000 is still under 1% of the total – and it would seem likely that the UK's exit from the European Union will dampen the attraction of the UK as a destination for Latin American migrants.

Of course, the migration traffic between Europe and Latin America is not just one way, and there are some 1.4m Europeans living in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the UN. The most important countries of origin for this European outmigration are Spain (336,000), Italy (309,000), Portugal (249,000), France (194,000), Germany (92,000), the UK (54,000), and the Netherlands (36,000).

Latin Americans in London

After the Pandemic

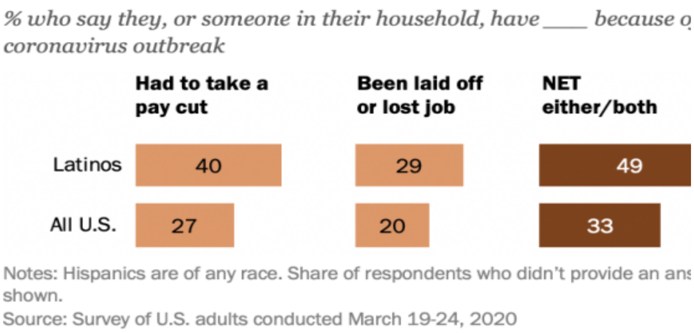
It is certain that the Covid-19 pandemic will have a significant impact on migration flows, but predicting exactly what that impact will be is complicated by the fact that some major consequences of the pandemic will have conflicting effects on migration dynamics.

The first obvious point is that economic conditions in the main source countries for migration will deteriorate. And if, as this report asserts, and the research supports, the 2008/09 global financial crisis led to increased state fragility in certain Central American and South American countries, and this in turn led to increased pressure on citizens to migrate, then it would seem certain that the deep recession induced by the Covid-19 crisis will have the same effect.

Furthermore, this effect is likely to be exacerbated by falling remittances from the US, which is home to 60% of Latin American migrants. A paper published by the Pew Research Center in April 2020 illustrates this point.

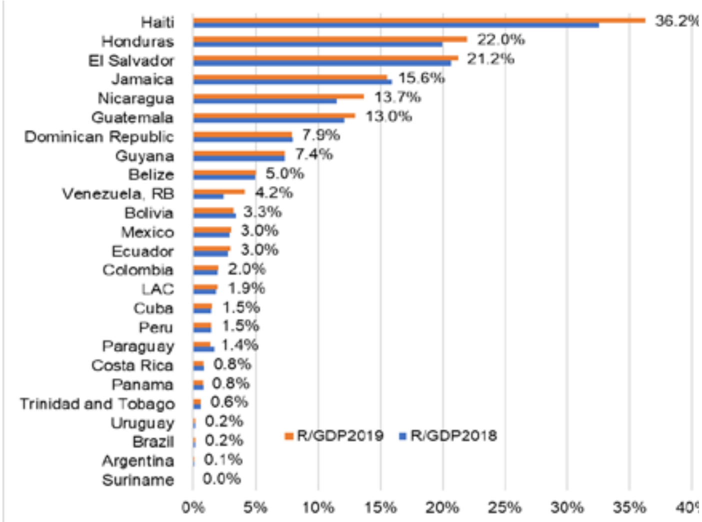
In a survey conducted from 19-24 March, around half (49%) of those Pew Research identifies as 'Hispanics' were saying that they or someone in their household had taken a pay cut or lost their job compared with 33% for all American adults. The numbers will be considerably worse now – at the time of the survey, the US unemployment rate was 4.4%; at the end of the April it was 14.7% – and the fact that those of Latin American origin will be among the worst affected is unlikely to have changed. A further point is that LAC migrants are likely to suffer not just from wage cuts and job losses but also from a lack of medical access and insurance.

Table 7: Latin American migrants in the US more at risk of Covid-19 job losses



Source: *Pew Research Center*

Table 8: Remittances as share of GDP, 2018/2019



Source: *World Bank Development Indicators*

The significance of Pew Research's findings could be profound for the remittance-dependent countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. For all of the LAC, remittances represent 1.9% of GDP; for El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti it is over 20% (see Table 8).

But while the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the already fragile states of Latin America and the Caribbean, compounded by a fall-off in remittances, seem certain to increase the pressures within many LAC countries for struggling citizens to emigrate, other effects of the pandemic are likely to increase the barriers to migration.

Firstly, and most obviously, international mobility has been severely curtailed, and this effect may persist long into the future in the absence of an effective vaccination. It could also provide useful cover for those countries – such as the US, UK, and in the EU – where anti-globalisation and anti-immigration pressures are already having an impact on migration flows.

In the longer term, on the other hand, if the Covid-19 crisis (along with already existing protectionist tendencies) were to lead to a shortening of supply chains and a repatriation of manufacturing, that could once again lead to increased demand for cheap labour. If US companies in particular are discouraged from manufacturing abroad, their appetite for imported cheap labour could increase, as was the case before the effects of Nafta, amongst other things, reduced migration flows from Mexico.

The willingness to accept migrants has been eroding

Conclusion

For the main countries of outmigration in Latin America and the Caribbean, the chance for large numbers of citizens to seek a better life elsewhere – whether within the region, in the US and Canada, or further afield in Europe and Asia – has been an important safety valve, relieving population pressures and the pressures on the state to deliver services and economic advancement. Most importantly, remittances have become a vital resource for many of the poorest countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. For many of the migrants from the most fragile states, the decision to migrate has been a question of survival itself.

But the willingness of many of the main receiving countries to continue to absorb large numbers of migrants has been eroding in recent years, most particularly in the United States. This can be seen in many policy initiatives, and in the decline in the annual number of new legal permanent residents since the present administration was elected in 2016 (from 1,183,505 in 2016 to 1,096,611 in 2018). It can also be seen in the number of apprehensions of illegal migrants on the US-Mexico border, which doubled (to 851,508) in Fiscal Year 2018-19 from the year before.

Furthermore, this tightening of immigration policy seems likely to intensify as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic become increasingly apparent and the main receiving countries struggle to protect health and jobs.

The considerable challenge for the main outmigration countries of Latin America and the Caribbean is that these likely increasing impediments to migration will be occurring just as they themselves will be struggling with the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis, which could increase both state fragility and the incentives for large numbers to seek a better life elsewhere. In short, a perfect storm would appear to be brewing with the pressures to migrate increasing just when the willingness and/or ability of the main receiving countries to accept migrants is diminishing.

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