



UNICEF CHILD ALERT | September 2023

The Changing Face of Child Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean

A region like no other

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I. Overview

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is home to one of the world's largest and most complex child migration crises. Across the region, millions of children and their families have left their schools, friends and communities as part of three major mixed migration flows and innumerable smaller-scale ones. These flows are multidirectional and interconnected, with many countries acting as places of origin, transit and destination all at once. And the face of child migration in the region is changing in line with the constantly evolving dynamics that drive the flows themselves. There is more diversity now in the nationalities and backgrounds of child refugees and migrants in LAC than we have seen in decades.

With the exception of 2020 when many COVID-19 border restrictions were in place, the number of children migrating or seeking asylum across LAC has been increasing steadily for the last 10 years. The number of children on the move in LAC has reached record highs at three key migration points across the region: the Darién jungle between Colombia and Panama, outward migration from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and northern Central America and Mexico.

Children are crossing multiple borders with or without their parents or guardians in search of better opportunities and protection. While the number of unaccompanied children on the move has continued to grow, the number of children with their families has risen proportionally. Today, the largest group of migrant children consists of children below 11 years old – accounting for up to 91 per cent of children on the move at some key transit points. This new reality of more and younger children on the move poses challenges

“If I find a person crying, I pat them on the back and say everything will be fine, or you are not alone, or I’m here if you need something. It’s hard; each person has their own story, some darker than others. I believe that if I don’t feel for others, I have lost my humanity.”

Rosa, 28, from Honduras, mother of three children

to national migration policies and humanitarian responses in the region. Increasingly, governments and humanitarian partners must prioritize family unity, the best interests of the child, legal identity and access to life-saving services when developing and implementing policy responses.

Although international migration in the region has been the focus of much greater public and political focus, in some countries, the number of people moving internally is far greater than those moving internationally.

The motivating factors behind a child or family's decision to move are tremendously varied. Some are escaping violence, political persecution and extreme poverty. Others leave in search of greater opportunities and a better future for their children or the desire to reunite with family members abroad. These factors are often compounded by political conflict, climate events and the chronic dysfunction of state institutions.

Millions of migrants and asylum-seekers are unable to access regular and safe migration pathways because they do not have official documentation, the means to pay the high cost of regular migration, or a sponsor in a destination country. They therefore use dangerous routes often facing treacherous terrains, exposure to disease and violence at the hands of criminal groups. For all their efforts and sacrifices, they may be apprehended in transit or upon reaching their destinations, detained, then returned to either their countries of origin or to their last country of transit. Children and families on the move are often compelled to take on additional risks to facilitate their journeys. Such risks often include paying coyotes (human

smugglers) to avoid detection by the authorities or to help navigate difficult terrain. Poor migrant families are often forced to finance their travel by selling what little property and belongings they have or by taking out substantial loans. While in transit, migrant and refugee children may also be forced into forms of child labour to pay coyotes or bribes, leaving them at risk of exploitation and abuse.

A range of diverse factors can shape the mobility experience for refugee and migrant children. These include public policy and legal frameworks in countries of transit and destination, border management practices, risks and length of the journey, travel companions, discrimination and xenophobia, as well as available resources and support.

Refugee and migrant children in the region also face significant barriers to accessing essential services in countries of transit and destination. At the same time, many host communities are struggling to meet the service and protection needs of migrant and domestic populations alike, causing additional strain on resources and social cohesion.

The diversity in backgrounds and interconnected nature of today's migration and refugee flows are evident in several key hotspots. The Darien jungle, a narrow strip of land connecting North and South America between Colombia and the Isthmus of Panama, provides a window into the diversity of movement. At its longest point, the Darien jungle stretches for approximately 160 kilometres. Impassable by road, it is the only interruption



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Colombia, 2019

to the 48,000 kilometre-long Pan-American Highway running from Argentina to Alaska. The Darien is a rugged environment with dense jungles, rushing rivers, treacherous hills and vast swamps with knee-deep mud. It is home to venomous snakes, fire ants and jaguars. But hundreds of thousands of migrants see it as the only viable way to continue their journey north.

Several other hotspots are examples of multidirectional and interconnected migration, including the movement of Haitians to South America, North America and recent returns to Haiti; El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico as countries of origin, transit and destination; and Colombia, Peru and Ecuador as a destination country for Venezuelans and origin and transit country for those moving through the Darien jungle.

This Child Alert report examines the changing dynamics of child migration in LAC through the lens of three key migration and refugee flows – northern Central America and Mexico, Haiti and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). Subsequent sections provide an overview of the factors driving child migration, the risks and hardships these children face, and the steps and policies to ensure their safety and well-being.

More children on the move in LAC

Around the world, children make up 13 per cent of the migrant population, but they account for 25 per cent of people on the move in the LAC region. As of 2021, children represented around 26 per cent of people forcibly displaced internationally in the Americas.

In recent years, the overall number and proportion of children and families comprising these migration flows has continued to rise, especially compared to five years ago when the majority were single male adults seeking employment opportunities.

The major flows in child migration, and migration more broadly, are concentrated in the movement within and through northern Central America and Mexico, and the movement of Haitians from Haiti and between other countries in the region, and the movement of migrants

from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). In South America, children account for an estimated 42 per cent of Venezuelan migrants. But there are also smaller, yet significant movements of people within the region, including those moving from Cuba and Nicaragua, those moving within and beyond the Andean countries of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru, and the extracontinental flows of migrants and refugees arriving to the region from Africa and Asia.

The number of migrants, including, children traversing the perilous Darien jungle between Colombia and Panama, for example, has been steadily increasing since 2021. That year, around 133,000 people were registered crossing the Darien jungle into Panama, of whom more than 29,000 were children. This is nearly five times more children than the number registered over the previous four years combined. In 2022, the number of crossings more than nearly doubled to 250,000 people, around 40,000 of whom were children – including more than 600 who were unaccompanied. More than 40,000 children have crossed the Darien jungle in the first six months of 2023, making it the year with the most child crossings on record.

Meanwhile, the number of refugee and migrant children apprehended at the southern border of the United States has also been increasing. United States Customs and Border Protection recorded more than 149,000 children in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 from October to September and over 155,000 in FY 2022. More than 83,000 were recorded in the first seven months of FY 2023.

With the number of refugee and migrant children growing steadily, so too is the diversity in nationalities. In the last two years, for example, migrants holding more than 70 nationalities from as far afield as Africa and Asia, have been documented transiting the Darien jungle between Colombia and Panama on their way to countries further north. And in 2021, around 40 per cent of the people apprehended at the United States southwest border originated from the Caribbean and Central American countries, with the rest coming from countries in South America, Africa and Asia. This proportion dropped to 75 per cent in FY 2022 and 62 per cent so far in FY 2023. Data show clearly that migrants and refugees affected by crises and deprivation in other parts of the world are traveling to the LAC region in search of safety and support, or with the hope of reaching Mexico, the United States and Canada.

II. Movement patterns

Major migration routes in Latin America and the Caribbean



Over the past decade, Mexico and the countries of northern Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – have experienced cycles of large-scale mixed migration movements. Each year, hundreds of thousands of migrants and asylum-seekers, an increasing proportion of whom are children and families, move between these countries and onward to the United States and Canada. Most are forced to use irregular and dangerous migration routes. Because of the nature of irregular migration, more restrictive immigration policies and forced migrant returns, these four countries are simultaneously countries of origin, transit, and destination.

As with other migration flows in the region, the reasons behind the significant movement of people out of and within northern Central America and Mexico are due largely to conditions on the ground. In many communities, gang-related violence, organized crime, extortion and limited access to quality education and social services are part of daily life. Children and families also face endemic poverty linked to broadening structural inequity. A child's lack of access to education due to the remoteness of the school signals a structural problem with the education system, triggering a series of consequences that can lead to life-long poverty.

Between 2014 and 2022, more than 2 million people are estimated to have emigrated from the countries of northern Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – both within the region and beyond. From FY 2018 to FY 2021, an average of 377,000 migrants have left these countries each year, with the majority heading towards the United States. Over the course of FY 2022, US Customs and Border Protection reported encounters with more than 541,000 nationals from northern Central American countries at the southern border; this included more than 140,000 children and family members, and 114,585 unaccompanied children.

The number of Mexican migrants, internally displaced people and asylum-seekers – including children – attempting to enter the United States has also risen each year since 2020. In FY 2021, United States Customs and Border Patrol reported encounters with more than 655,000 Mexican migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, including over 29,000 children and family members and nearly 26,000 unaccompanied children. In FY 2022, the numbers rose to more than 808,000 Mexican migrants and refugees, including nearly 40,000 children and family members and almost 28,000 unaccompanied children. According to the Mexican Secretary of the Interior, close to 30,000 children of Mexican nationality were returned from the United States in 2022. Nearly 20,000 of the returned children were unaccompanied.

Yet for many migrants and asylum-seekers from northern Central America and Mexico, the journey to the United States is unsuccessful. Upon detection by the authorities, they may be returned to their country of origin or their last country of transit. When children and families are forcibly returned to their countries of origin without adequate protection, they may face some combination of stigmatization, and social and economic exclusion. They may also find themselves in the same or worse situation they were trying to escape, experiencing a lack of economic opportunities, poverty and violence. The result is a cyclical mixed migration flow in which many people who are forcibly returned attempt the journey again to escape worsening circumstances or to reunite with family members abroad.

According to the IOM's Northern Triangle Migration Information Initiative (NTMI), over the course of 2022, more than 197,000 migrants and refugees were returned to their countries of origin in northern

Central America from the United States and Mexico. This included nearly 36,000 children and over 41,000 women. In 2022, Mexican immigration authorities returned 9,192 children to their countries of origin, 71 per cent of whom were unaccompanied and 85 per cent of whom held Honduran or Guatemalan nationalities.

Costa Rica, with a total population of 5.2 million, is an important destination country for refugees and migrants searching for better economic opportunities or to reunite with family members. Most originate from Nicaragua, but many originate from other Central American countries. According to data from the General Directorate of Migration (DGME), 384,894 Nicaraguans were registered as living in Costa Rica in 2021, with an additional estimated population of 200,000 unregularized migrants from Nicaragua also residing in the country.

Refugee and migrant children and adolescents, and their families, are among the most vulnerable groups in the country. Some of the main problems they face are infectious diseases, insecurity, sexual and gender-based violence, xenophobia and discrimination, school bullying, educational lagging, access to social protection and public services, housing and economic insufficiency.

Likewise, the movement of people from Haiti to other countries in the Americas has been one of the largest migration flows in the region for over a decade. There are myriad reasons for migration from Haiti and for the movement of Haitians within the region. The country continues to suffer under the weight of an entrenched socio-economic crisis, political instability (that most recently stems from the assassination of the President and delayed elections), rampant gang violence, severe food insecurity and the re-emergence of cholera. Humanitarian conditions on the ground are dire and UNICEF estimates that nearly 3 million children need humanitarian assistance.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to fully account for the number of Haitian migrants and refugees, especially children on the move in LAC because of a lack of disaggregated data and information on children born to Haitian parents abroad in the region. According to figures available for 2020, however, there were more than 870,000 migrants and refugees from Haiti in other countries in the region. This includes almost 500,000 in

the Dominican Republic, 237,000 in Chile and 33,000 in Brazil. There are also more than 252,000 descendants of Haitians born in the Dominican Republic.

More recent data from Panama and the United States show that the movement of Haitians within the region has continued and even increased in the last two years. In 2021, for example, the Government of Panama recorded nearly 83,000 Haitian migrants and refugees reaching the country through the Darien jungle, compared to over 22,000 in 2022 and more than 31,000 from January to May 2023. United States Customs and Border Protection recorded more than 47,000 encounters with Haitian migrants and refugees at its southern border in FY 2021, including 92 unaccompanied children, and almost 54,000 in FY 2022, including 283 unaccompanied children. The United States has recorded nearly 40,000 encounters so far in FY 2023.

But like migrants and asylum-seekers from northern Central America and Mexico, Haitians are also being forcibly returned to Haiti. This includes many children holding different nationalities because they were born abroad to Haitian parents. According to Human Rights Watch, between September 2021 and February 2022, for example, the United States returned 2,300 children born abroad to Haitian parents, mostly in Chile, back to Haiti.

Between January and November 2022, at least 21,987 Haitian migrants, asylum-seekers and undocumented (people of Haitian descent or Dominican stripped of nationality), were returned to Haiti from the United States, as well as from other Caribbean countries and territories. Notably, more than 8,000 of those returned were children and women. Also that year, around 171,000 undocumented foreigners were deported from the Dominican Republic, mostly of Haitian nationality. In

the first six months of 2023, 110,000 people of Haitian origin were returned from the Dominican Republic. The Center for Migration Observation and Social Development in the Caribbean (OBMICA) remarked that the Dominican legal framework complies with the principle of non-detention of migrant children and adolescents, however promoted policies have rendered this legal framework ineffective, resulting in particularly serious harm to pregnant women, children and adolescents, and other vulnerable people, in term of the deportation process.

United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have warned of the risks of returning migrants, asylum-seekers and undocumented to Haiti, given the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis and risk of exposure to violence. United Nations agencies, including UNICEF and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, have raised grave concerns about massive deportations of Haitians without adequate protection screenings, especially for children and women. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, warned in November 2022 that, "The systematic violations of rights in Haiti do not currently allow for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of Haitians to the country."

In addition to these long-standing movement patterns, the flow of migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) has grown in the past years. Since 2015, different sources estimated around 5 to 7 million migrants and refugees have left Venezuela, with most of them living in other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, mainly Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Brazil.

This movement, occurring mostly since 2015, has been driven by eight years of economic and political constraints inside the country and unilateral coercivities measures that have had devastating consequences for the country's children and families. UNICEF estimates that there are now 3.8 million children in need of humanitarian assistance across the country.

Until 2018, most of the Venezuelan migrants and refugees settled in the region, with relatively small numbers arriving at the United States southern border. This started to change in 2020 and 2021 as socio-economic consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic, including xenophobia and economic contraction, made

it harder for Venezuelan migrants to earn a living in host countries in LAC. The number of Venezuelans traversing the Darien jungle in hopes of reaching the United States was more than 150,000, a 50-fold increase between 2021 and 2022.

Where mixed migration flows converge

Mixed movement refers to people who travel along the same migration routes, using the same forms of transportation. However, they have varying demographic profiles, needs, migration status and motivations for migrating.

Mixed movements in LAC, including of children, are converging, and interacting in new and dynamic ways. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Darien jungle between Colombia and Panama. In 2022 some 250,000 migrants, including 40,000 children crossed the Darien. Over 196,000 migrants crossed from January to June of 2023, including more than 40,000 children.

As discussed in more detail in the next chapter, there are several key reasons for the dramatic increase in people, including children and families, moving through the Darien jungle. But overall, there are more migrants and asylum-seekers motivated to enter North America, but fewer regular and irregular routes to get there. And for those coming from outside the LAC region, it is easier to arrive by air or sea at ports of entry in South American countries with less restrictive visa requirements. They can then make their way over land to Colombia and then into the Darien jungle for the journey northward. While most of the migrants moving through the Darien jungle originate from countries in LAC, nearly 26,000 migrants who crossed in 2022 originated from countries in Africa and Asia – these included over 4,000 from India, 2,200 from Afghanistan, and well over a thousand each from Bangladesh, Cameroun, Nepal, Senegal and Somalia.

Most of the migrants who reach the Panamanian side of the Darien jungle intend to travel northward in the hope of reaching the United States. As migrants progress through Central America, they essentially join the flow



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Mexico, 2022

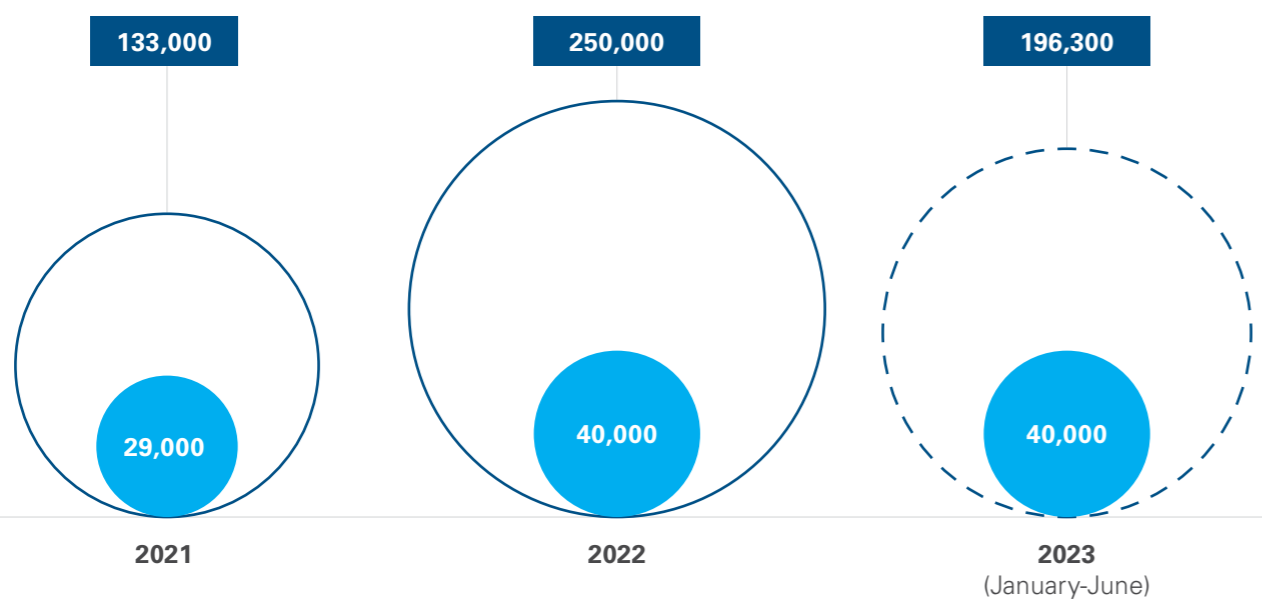
of migrants originating from Central American countries. Migrants and asylum-seekers in these flows may not join in the literal sense, but they may come together in groups known as migrant caravans that can reach up to 12,000 people as they make the overland trek. People from different migration flows may also converge at key points like border crossings and migrant reception or detention facilities.

Again, available data from US Customs and Border Protection show that the diversity of migrants reaching the southern border has been increasing dramatically over the last two years. The data also clearly show multiple mixed migration flows coming together. In FY 2021, US Customs and Border Protection reported encounters at its southwest border with more than 28,000 migrants, including nearly 17,000 children and family members, originating from countries outside of LAC. These numbers jumped to over 130,000 and more than 59,000 in 2022. When these figures are added to the encounters with migrants and asylum-seekers originating from LAC countries, the numbers

grow to over 1.7 million total encounters, including almost 480,000 individuals in family units and more than 146,000 unaccompanied children in FY 2021, and 2.37 million total encounters in FY 2022, including more than 560,000 individuals in family units and over 152,000 unaccompanied children. So far in FY 2023, United States Customs and Border Patrol has reported more than 150,000 encounters with migrants originating from outside LAC, including over 49,000 children and family members.

And in a sign of how real-world events beyond LAC affect the flow of children and family migration in the region, 2022 also saw a significant rise in Ukrainian migrants and asylum-seekers arriving at the United States southern border – a rise that coincided with the war in Ukraine. In FY 2022, more than 25,000 Ukrainians arrived at the southern border, including nearly 16,000 individuals in a family unit (FMUA). It should be noted, however, that in many cases, Ukrainian migrants and asylum seekers would have used air travel from Europe to Mexico, rather than entering the region further south.

More children on the move
Children crossing the Darien jungle



○ People ● Children

Source: Migración Panamá, National Immigration Service of Panama, https://www.migracion.gob.pa/images/img2023/pdf/IRREGULARES_%20POR_DARI%C3%89N_JUNIO_2023.pdf

III. Root causes

Across LAC, the root causes of large-scale mixed migration flows and the motivations of those who move within them are highly variable. Millions of children and families in the region are driven to leave their homes and communities because of conditions in their country of origin. These can include socio-economic factors like widespread poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, structural inequality, food insecurity and barriers to essential services. Families may also be motivated to migrate to secure a more hopeful future for their children, especially those without access to health care and education. People may also leave their countries and seek asylum to escape violence – domestic, gender-based, gang-related and political – in search of safety. Disasters caused by events like hurricanes and earthquakes have also caused significant internal displacement in the region. And in many contexts, these drivers of migration are being amplified by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Structural and economic inequalities

To varying degrees, structural and economic inequalities are endemic across the countries of origin for each of these flows. There are limited livelihood opportunities, which means families struggle to make ends meet. Because of structural inequalities, families may not be able to access essential services for themselves and their children.

Haiti is the most impoverished country in the Western Hemisphere, with close to 60 per cent of the population living below the poverty line. The country ranks 163 out of 191 on the 2021 Human Development Index. Millions of people and families struggle to get

by and obtain nutritious food. An estimated 4.9 million people in Haiti are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, according to the most recent Integrated Food Security Phase Classification analysis from March 2023. A nutrition survey conducted this year reveals that child malnutrition is also on the rise. More than 115,600 children are expected to suffer from severe wasting over the course of 2023.

The countries of northern Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – also rank among the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. As of 2019, the poverty rates in Guatemala and Honduras were more than 50 per cent, while the rate in El Salvador stood at around 23 per cent. Meanwhile, there are limited job opportunities in formal employment sectors, forcing many people to scrape by with whatever they can earn in informal and unregulated areas of work.

Meanwhile in Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), the access of children to basic services remains challenging and could only be guaranteed, especially those of the most vulnerable, if the resources and institutional capacities are reinforced. This is especially problematic for families trying to secure quality and diversified diets. According to current estimates, nearly 23 per cent of the country's population is undernourished, and 1.8 million girls and women aged 15 to 19 are affected by anaemia.

Access to services

These high levels of poverty and structural inequality have direct consequences for children across a range of indicators, severely limiting their access to adequate nutrition, health care, water, sanitation, protection and education services.

In the countries of northern Central America, for example, families living in poverty may not be able to send their children to school. And even if they attend, these children are likely to receive low-quality education in under-resourced schools with teachers who have not had access to proper training. The completion rates for upper secondary school are just 35 per cent in El Salvador, 26 per cent in Guatemala and 33 per cent in Honduras. Without quality learning, children are less likely to secure jobs as adults – perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage.

In Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), there are widespread electricity shortages, and many households experience irregular access to water service. Three quarters of households experience irregular water

service provision, while 5.5 per cent do not have access at all. Children's access to health care and education has also been hard hit. Economic contraction has prevented badly-needed public investment in health and education infrastructure and supplies. Meanwhile, thousands of professional health workers and educators have left the country, compromising the quality of what services remain.

Haiti also experiences severe fuel shortages, which significantly impact the delivery of basic services like water and electricity. This prevents hospitals and health centres from functioning properly and leaves 45 per cent of households without access to basic drinking water. Amidst the ongoing cholera outbreak, such conditions could be catastrophic.



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Peru, 2023

Violence

In northern Central America and parts of Mexico, the lack of access to quality education and limited livelihood opportunities could be related to high levels of armed violence. Past conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala left large populations of unemployed men with access to weapons, as well as weak state institutions undermined by corruption. In addition, thousands of violent gang members who were imprisoned in the United States were deported back to northern Central America in 1996. Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18) are the largest of the deported gangs, which have expanded across the region with little meaningful pushback from police or state security forces. Gang violence is often perpetrated with impunity due to weaknesses in criminal investigation and the justice system.

Gangs have exerted territorial control across many communities in these countries, relying on funds from local extortion rackets and low-level drug dealing to sustain their operations. Gang members use violence – either actual or threatened – to maintain their territory by subduing the local population and keeping rivals out. Families living in areas under gang control are at risk of violent crime and extortion. Some children are forcibly recruited by the gangs, while others join as their only perceived means of protection. Gang threats and harassment have also caused thousands of children in the region to drop out of school.

The countries of northern Central America and Mexico are among the world's most violent countries that are not at war, with homicide rates as of 2021 reaching 38 per 100,000 people in Honduras; 28 per 100,000 in Mexico; 18 in per 100,000 in El Salvador; and 20 per 100,000 in Guatemala.

Mexico is especially affected by violence perpetrated by drug cartels and other organized criminal groups. Across the country, municipalities affected by organized crime have the highest homicide rates for children and adolescents. According to 2021 data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI),

the municipalities with most homicides of children and adolescents were Fresnillo in the state of Zacatecas, Juarez in the state of Chihuahua, Celaya, León and Irapuato in the state of Guanajuato, and Zamora in the state of Michoacan. The national homicide rate of children in Mexico is 3.64 per 100,000.

Criminal violence caused 29,000 displaced people in 2021 and 9,200 in 2022, with upwards of 90 per cent of those displacements occurring in states of Chiapas, Michoacan and Zacatecas. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 386,000 people in Mexico were living in displacement caused by conflict and violence at the end of 2022.

Meanwhile in Haiti, the last two years have seen a significant spike in armed violence and violent protests that have at times brought the capital city and other urban areas to a standstill. State institutions have been critically weakened, with some barely functional because of the violence and political instability.

According to an analysis from the Congressional Research Service, gangs armed with high calibre weapons control about 60 per cent of Port-au-Prince. Key transportation routes north and south of the capital city are at times impassable because of gang violence. This has restricted aid organizations from traveling these roads to reach populations in need. Close to 165,000 people have been internally displaced because of the violence, leaving many to shelter with host families whose limited resources must now extend further.

In addition to losing access to essential services like health care and education because of the violence, children are also being directly targeted, especially with sexual violence. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has reported that, "Children as young as 10 and elderly women have been subjected to sexual violence – including collective rapes for hours in front of their parents or children by more than half a dozen armed elements – amid an explosion of gang violence in ... Port-au-Prince."

“Escaping certain death”: A family’s story of fleeing extortion and violence at the hands of gangs

Tapachula, Mexico – Rosa, a 28-year-old mother of three children, sits with her husband, 34-year-old Miguel, on a bench in the backyard of a shelter for migrants in Tapachula, Chiapas, in the south of Mexico. Snug in between them is their youngest child, 8-year-old Sophia.

Rosa wraps her arm around her daughter, caresses her hand and plays with her hair. Rosa speaks slowly and softly, holding back tears as she recalls how their life in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, was ripped apart.

Monday, 22 August 2022 – an ordinary day for many but one this family will never forget. **“After that day, I can tell you my life became a nightmare,”** says Rosa. For years, the parents had been forced to pay a weekly ‘fee’ for their two small shops – a clothing store and a tortilla stand – to the gang that controlled their neighborhood. The fees grew and grew until the family was left with nothing.

Extortion is everywhere, says Rosa. **“Wherever you are, if you have a business, if you want to start a project, it costs you.”**

When payment day arrived, Rosa and Miguel couldn’t make the full fee despite pulling together what little cash they had. That’s when the threats escalated; if the family didn’t have the rest of the money, they’d face vandalism and violence, or even murder.

Terrified and without the resources to cover the payments or move the entire family, Rosa fled with her youngest child a few nights later, Friday, 26 August. The rest of the family went into hiding.

After four days of walking and taking buses, with little food or water, Rosa and Sophia found themselves in a strained and overcrowded shelter for migrants in Tapachula, Mexico.

But the death threats continued, with calls and text messages detailing where she was and what she was doing. **“You can hide under a rock, but we have Mexico covered, too,”** said a voice over the phone.

A few days later, Miguel joined Rosa and Sophia in Tapachula. Sadly, it meant leaving their two teenage children in hiding, along with Rosa’s elderly mother. The family is heartbroken but says they **“escaped certain death”**.

Both parents work to care for the place and the people at the shelter. **“... It is a satisfaction to know that I can help others ... If I find a person crying, I pat them on the back and say everything will be fine, you are not alone, or I’m here if you need something. It’s hard; each person has their own story, some darker than others. I believe that if I don’t feel for others, I have lost my humanity.”**

The family has started their asylum application for Mexico with plans to move north, as far away from the gang they’re fleeing as possible. They hope to reunite their family and build a safer and brighter future.

Sophia carried a small pink backpack during the journey from Honduras to Mexico. She wears it at the shelter too. In it are important items, like her passport, birth certificate and medication. And, like many other children around the world, she also carries homework that she’ll have to complete in time for the next day’s lessons.

Disasters and climate change

In recent years, extreme weather events linked in part to climate change have devastated parts of northern Central America. Within a two-week period in November 2020, hurricanes Eta and Iota slammed into Central America causing widespread destruction. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua were especially hard-hit with the storms affecting nearly 10 million people across Central America. More than 5 million people, including close to 2 million children, were left in need of humanitarian assistance. Around 1.5 million people were displaced, including 937,000 in Honduras, 339,000 in Guatemala and 232,000 in Nicaragua. Rural and poorer families were disproportionately affected, especially those whose livelihoods depended on agriculture. More than 700,000 hectares of crops were destroyed, along with livestock and agricultural infrastructure, causing food insecurity and loss of income for the most vulnerable.

Northern Central America also includes the ‘Dry Corridor’, an area 1,600 kilometres long encompassing 44 per cent of the land of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, home to 11.5 million people living in rural areas. The region continues to experience rising food insecurity because of prolonged periods of drought (linked to El Niño) interrupted by intense rainfall and storms (linked to climate change), which together devastate the land’s productive agricultural capacity.

These disasters and extreme weather events are making parts of northern Central America increasingly uninhabitable and driving families to migrate within and out of their countries.

Likewise, Haiti has experienced a string of disasters for more than a decade – earthquakes and hurricanes in particular – that have also contributed to migration from the country.

This began with the catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake in 2010 that left over 222,000 people dead and 1.3 million internally displaced. It also devastated infrastructure in and around Port-au-Prince, while further damaging the economy. In the ensuing years until around 2018, tens of thousands of Haitians moved to other countries in the region. Most settled in Brazil, which offered humanitarian visas and the possibility of work for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer

Olympics, and Chile, which did not require Haitians to obtain entry visas prior to 2018.

Haiti has suffered more recent disasters like Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and the 7.2 magnitude earthquake in 2021, both of which displaced thousands more people and contributed to additional migration.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had severe socio-economic consequences for children and families in LAC. It has also contributed to an increase in the movement of children and adults across all three of the major mixed migration flows. A key reason for this is the massive toll the pandemic has exacted on economies and livelihoods.

Many people who lost their livelihoods because of lockdowns and the economic downturn felt they had no other choice but to move in search of work. At the same time, those who were already earning an income as migrant workers (especially those working informally) were often the first to lose their jobs when lockdowns hit and businesses cut expenses. This combined with rising xenophobia (with migrants being blamed for the spread of the virus) and tightened border controls under public health measures led to more migration and returns, including of children. During FY 2020, for example, United States Customs and Border Protection reported encounters with 15,687 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. This figure ballooned to more than 114,000 in both FY 2021 and FY 2022 as the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic spread.

Likewise, from March to November of 2020, more than 200,000 Haitians and people of Haitian descent returned to Haiti from the Dominican Republic as socio-economic conditions and xenophobia worsened due to the forced economic shutdown imposed by the government. And many Haitian migrants who had settled in Brazil and Chile in the years after the 2010 earthquake began migrating northwards for the same reasons, this include children born to Haitian migrants in Brazil, Chile, or elsewhere along their journeys, who has been returned to Haiti despite their not holding Haitian nationality. According to a report from *The New*

York Times, most of the 133,000 migrants, including nearly 30,000 children, crossing the Darien jungle in 2021 were “Haitians who settled in South America during better economic times, but who were among the first to lose jobs and homes when the pandemic hit.”

Thousands of Venezuelan migrants, particularly in South American and Caribbean countries, also saw

their livelihoods disappear because of the pandemic and its effect on economies. In some communities, they too were targeted with discrimination and blamed for the spread of the disease. As a result, thousands of migrants moved again, including many who returned to Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). Between March and September of 2020, some 130,000 Venezuelans, 32,500 of whom were children, returned to the country.



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Peru, 2023

IV. Dangerous journeys

Every day across LAC, migrants and refugees with limited access to safe and regular migration pathways turn to perilous informal routes. As gruelling as life is for these families in their home communities, the migration journey can add even more dire levels of risk and deprivation.

Most of the migrants and asylum-seekers using irregular migration pathways in LAC are from poor and vulnerable households and communities. They usually lack the documentation needed to enter countries of transit or destination and do not have the financial resources to organize safe and efficient transport. They have no option but to turn to whatever means of transportation they can afford – usually bus, boat or on foot – and cross borders at unofficial entry points.

The physical risks along these irregular routes are innumerable, especially for migrant children. Last year alone, at least 92 migrant children died or went missing while moving through LAC. This is more than any other year since 2014. These risks are compounded by the almost complete lack of access to essential services – like health care, nutrition, safe water, sanitation and protection – which children need for their well-being.

Refugee and migrant children from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), for example, report walking on foot for days or even weeks as they cross into neighbouring countries. In many cases, they make this journey with insufficient quantities of food and limited access to safe drinking water, shelter and sanitation.



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As discussed previously in this Child Alert, the trek through the Darien jungle is riddled with natural hazards to which young children are vulnerable. UNICEF recently reported that, “Children are also at risk of diarrhoea, respiratory diseases, dehydration from the complete lack of drinking water, insect-borne diseases and attacks by wild animals.” According to IOM, at least 315 migrants, including 43 children, have died or gone missing while crossing the Darien jungle since 2014. Meanwhile, those trying to reach the United States southern border with Mexico must brave mountains, deserts, rivers and for many, a dangerous trip on La Bestia – a railway line on which many migrants have been injured or killed trying to hitch a ride. At least 127 migrant children died trying to cross the southern border since 2014.

There are also several irregular seafaring migration routes to and within the Caribbean. These include maritime crossings from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) to Caribbean islands, from the Dominican Republic and Haiti to Puerto Rico, from Cuba to Florida, and departures from Haiti to LAC and the United States. These voyages are often made in unseaworthy vessels, leaving their passengers at risk of capsizing and drowning. Since 2014, at least 987 migrants, including at least 40 children, have died or gone missing along these routes.

Violence, exploitation and abuse

Along any of the mixed migration routes, migrants and refugees may also encounter violence, exploitation and abuse. The risk is greatest for separated and unaccompanied children and women who can become easy prey for traffickers, criminals, organized gangs, security forces and others who wish to exploit, hurt or even kill them, especially if they are moving alone or in small groups. At least 383 migrants moving through the region have lost their lives to violence since 2014. The true figure is likely much higher as many migrant deaths go unreported.

For example, many Venezuelan migrants cross into Colombia at unofficial border crossings controlled by armed groups who charge a fee to cross. From 2020 to 2022, up to two thirds of Venezuelans crossing into Colombia used these unofficial entry points because of COVID-19 related border closures. According to reports, the groups who control these crossings are known to beat, rape and kill migrants who cannot pay. Unaccompanied and separated children who move in areas where armed groups operate, on either side of the border, are at heightened risk of forced recruitment and sexual exploitation.

And in the Darien jungle, UNICEF has found ‘that migrant and refugee families with children are particularly exposed to violence (because they are easy targets), including physical and sexual violence, trafficking and extortion from criminal gangs while crossing’ through the jungle. There are also increasing reports of adolescent girls and women being sexually assaulted in the Darien jungle.

Further north, there are many reports of gangs and drug cartels extorting money from migrants, particularly as they move through Mexico. These organizations are also known to traffic migrant and refugee children for labour or sex, and to use them as drug mules for illicit smuggling. According to a 2021 report from National Institute of Public Health and the National Autonomous University, nearly 30 per cent of migrants moving through Mexico have experienced physical, psychological or sexual violence while in transit. Survivors who require medical care and support frequently go without, either because such services are denied to them or because they do not wish to identify themselves as migrants or refugees by contacting law enforcement or care providers.

Irregular migrants are also at high risk of apprehension and detention by the police or other authorities during their journey. Detention and family separation are traumatic experiences that can leave children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and can create toxic stress. Multiple studies have shown how such stress impairs children’s long-term development well after the initial experience is over. Prolonged exposure to traumatic situations – including child detention and family separation – can cause extended release of the stress hormone cortisol, which harms brain functionality.

Supporting the dreams of migrant children who cross the Altiplano to reach Chile

Every day, 150 migrants cross the Andean plateau and the mountain trails on foot to arrive in Chile. Most of them are from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). There are already 450,000 Venezuelans in the country; more than half are women, children and adolescents. Venezuelans cross South America in a 4,700-kilometer journey exposed to many dangers; the majority face the last stretch on foot, without access to water food, or shelter.

In Colchane, on one of the northern borders of the country, the Chilean government set up a temporary camp, where migrants can spend the night, eat, wash and gather strength to continue their journey. There, UNICEF and its partners provide humanitarian support to children and adolescents in the First Reception Center located inside the shelter.

“The passage of the trail was pure cold water, like ice (...) We threw away all the clothes trying to save my daughter’s life,” recalls Jennifer Montilla, 32, who walks with difficulty due to her advanced pregnancy.

Together with three of her children, she left her hometown of Barinas (Venezuela) at the beginning of 2021, to finally cross the Andean trails between the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Chile a year later. The family walked at night through the swamps so as not to be seen by the police.

During the journey, Jennifer’s daughter, 13-year-old Yannelis, almost died of hypothermia due to the low temperatures, but her desperate screams alerted the police, who ran to rescue the girl and took her to the Temporary Device in the Chilean border town of Colchane. In this government-run camp, they received medical attention, shelter and food for two days. From there, they were transferred by bus to the Lobito Transitory Device, a shelter installed in the port city of Iquique, Tarapacá region, 273 kilometres from the border that they barely managed to cross.

UNICEF supports the Chilean State’s response in a coordinated manner, safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents in vulnerable situations in northern Chile, where the entry of migrants has increased exponentially.

There, UNICEF facilitates, together with other partner agencies, the delivery of food, shelter and hygiene supplies. It also provides psychosocial support, collaborates in referrals to state health and education networks, and supports the construction of a migration plan for families.

UNICEF and its partners support the Temporary Devices and First Reception Centers for migrants who cross highways, deserts and mountains to reach Chile. It is an unpredictable journey that many do not survive. Along the journey and after arrival, the immediate needs of children and adolescents include access to psychosocial support, protection, health, water, hygiene and sanitation.

V. Barriers to services and support

Every child has the right to legal identity, quality health care, nutritious food, clean water, education and safety – regardless of their legal status, nationality or citizenship. Yet across LAC, migrant and refugee children often face significant barriers in accessing the services they need for their well-being. Many are missing out on education, proper health care and protection, both while in transit and upon reaching their destination. They may find it difficult to feel at home in new communities, especially if they need to learn a new language or adapt to a different culture. These challenges can create lasting physical and psychosocial consequences for children that may prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Throughout much of the region, the COVID-19 pandemic has put essential services for children under significant strain, further reducing access for migrant children. Thousands of migrant families have lost their primary sources of income during the pandemic, leading

to evictions and an inability to make ends meet. Compounding all this, misinformation on the spread of COVID-19 continues to exacerbate the xenophobia and discrimination that migrant and displaced children and their families already faced.

Venezuelan migrant and refugee families in Colombia, for example, have reported significantly higher levels of food insecurity than their host communities. Needs assessments have also shown that Venezuelan families in Colombia have reduced access to improved water sources, drinking water, sanitation and electricity. According to a 2022 assessment, 24 per cent of Venezuelan children in Colombia aged 6 to 11, and nearly 40 per cent aged 12 to 17 did not attend school.

Recent studies have resulted in similar findings for Haitian migrants living in the Dominican Republic. Many Haitian migrant families or their descendants live below the poverty line and have extremely limited access



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to legal identification and permits. This reduces their access to essential services, social benefits and decent housing. It also prevents them from sitting secondary school certification exams. Children whose parents have been repatriated to Haiti are at heightened risk of trafficking for forced labour in the agricultural sector.

Indigenous children

While all refugee and migrant children are likely to face limited access to services in transit or upon reaching their destinations, some groups are especially vulnerable. These include children with disabilities, children identifying as LGBTQI+ and children from indigenous groups. Far more research is needed to adequately account for the risks and deprivations faced by migrant children with disabilities and those identifying as LGBTQI+. There are, however, significant data available on indigenous migrant children in LAC.

Multiple studies have shown that indigenous children do not have adequate access to protection services in transit and host countries alike. Some indigenous children from Guatemala, for example, have been forced into child labour while migrating through Mexico. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has also reported cases of indigenous girls being forced into domestic servitude over the course of their migration journeys. Other studies have shown that indigenous migrant and refugee children are at greater risk of sex trafficking.

Further south, indigenous children are overrepresented as a proportion of the refugees and migrants who have left the Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) irregular migration pathways – with many having moved into Brazil, Colombia, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. With the exception of Trinidad and Tobago, the majority of indigenous migrants have settled in isolated rural areas close to the Venezuelan border where they have very limited access to essential services, including health care and sanitation. Many of these communities also lack adequate food sources, leaving children at risk of malnutrition.

There are close to 9,000 indigenous refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) now living in Brazil, with children accounting for around half

of this population. IOM reported that just 20 per cent of Venezuelan Warao children (the largest indigenous migrant group present in Brazil) were attending school, around half of the average for non-indigenous Venezuelan migrants. This could be because of the lack of education services in rural areas and insufficient spaces, materials and trained professionals to ensure a proper multicultural and multilanguage approach to education for Indigenous children.

Returned refugees and migrants

Migrant and asylum-seeking children, and their families, are also being forcibly returned to their countries of origin or familial descent by authorities in transit and destination countries. In many cases, these decisions are not being made in the best interest of migrants – especially children. Those who are returned often experience even more deprivation and limited access to services than they did before setting out on the migration journey in the first place.

Migrants who are forcibly returned frequently find themselves in crippling debt, unable to earn back the money they spent on the journey. Having sold everything and taken out loans to finance their trip, they are left with nothing when they return. This economic pressure can leave children and families without homes or the resources to pay for essentials such as food, health care and school fees.

Adult returnees may be stigmatized and refused employment for having failed in their migration attempts. This stigma can extend to returned children and adolescents, preventing them from going to school or engaging in community activities. The situation for returned children who spent their formative years in a different country, or who may have even been born and raised abroad, can be extremely challenging; they are essentially placed in a completely different socio-economic and cultural environment without support for their mental health and well-being.

In some cases, it is unsafe for migrant and refugee children, and their families to return to their home communities because of the threat of violence.

VI. UNICEF in action

Regardless of the reasons for leaving the country of origin, migratory or legal status, children on the move and their families have rights, including protection and safe access to basic services, and any re-victimization. UNICEF is on the ground across LAC, working alongside governments and partners, to provide life-saving assistance and support to migrant, refugee and displaced children. This includes efforts to expand their access to education, health and child protection systems in both transit and host countries.

In 2022, thanks to donor contributions, UNICEF and partners reached around 5.2 million migrant children with a range of life-saving services, including access to primary healthcare, vaccines, nutrition services, water and sanitation, psychosocial support, alternative care, protection and justice services, and support for family reunification.

In 2023, UNICEF is continuing to provide children and families with access to basic services throughout their migration journey, as well as integrated interventions to facilitate their access to education, health and protection services in host communities. Examples of UNICEF's work include:

To help children and young people in LAC escape the cycle of inequality and disadvantage, UNICEF and partners support government authorities and service providers working to expand access to basic services such as education and health care – especially for the most vulnerable.

- UNICEF's offices in the region are involved in various efforts to measure and address multidimensional child poverty, strengthen public investment in children and develop child-responsive social protection initiatives. In addition, they provide technical support to help governments improve the reach and effectiveness of conditional cash transfer

programmes, which aim to reduce poverty and facilitate access to services for children and women who otherwise might have to migrate.

- UNICEF has also developed programmes to identify out-of-school children and support their educational reintegration through more flexible and adaptable curricula, and other measures. These efforts help children and families contend with financial barriers, such as school fees and related costs, as well as threats of gang violence in and around schools.
- UNICEF also works with national education systems, develops pedagogical materials, provides training, and raises awareness to fight discrimination against migrant and refugee children.
- UNICEF supports initiatives aimed at providing migrant children with legal identification so that they can better access essential services.
- UNICEF works to strengthen national capacities to improve access to services, prevent and respond to violence, strengthen justice systems, and create education and livelihood opportunities for vulnerable children, and families.

UNICEF and partners provide targeted support to help national and local child protection systems prevent, detect and safeguard children from violence in LAC.

- UNICEF works with municipal governments, faith-based organizations, communities and schools to reduce violence through the creation of safe spaces and alternative recreational, educational and vocational opportunities.
- In collaboration with its partners, UNICEF also provides psychosocial support and other assistance to children and families affected by gang activity,



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Colombia, 2022

VII. Call to action for children on the move

Children across the LAC region are facing an array of crises from climate change to violence to the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. These crises are costing millions of children in the region their education, safety and well-being. As a result, more children from more places are moving through the region than ever before – all in the hope of securing a more brighter future for themselves and their families.

None of these mixed migration flows are moving in isolation; they are dynamic, and they interact and intersect. Most LAC countries are simultaneously points of origin, transit, destination and return. This necessitates an all-of-region integrated approach (with support from the international community) to protecting all refugee and migrant children and to alleviating the root causes of irregular and forced migration.

UNICEF continues to urge United Nations Member States in the region to adopt the following actions to ensure the rights, safety, and well-being of migrant and refugee children:

- other forms of violence and mental health issues arising from the migration experience itself.
- exploitation and trafficking and to help with access to essential services.
- The Social and Behavioral Change initiatives supported by UNICEF create mechanisms to know and understand the needs of children and families during the migratory route, based on which, UNICEF develop communication mechanisms, such as helpline numbers and the location of shelters – that children and families can use to protect themselves from violence, the location of health centres, advice on protection against diseases, among others. In the region, the use of the U-Report platform (Iniciativa Uniendo Voces) is an important way to help migrant children and their families.
- UNICEF country offices work to improve temporary care conditions for children on the move and expand family-based care arrangements.
- UNICEF has been pivotal in strengthening the capacity of the region's child protection systems to identify children affected by different forms of violence, and ensure their referral and access to alternative care, psychosocial support, family counselling and other necessary services. UNICEF also works with national justice systems to improve protection measures for child victims of violence and reduce impunity for perpetrators of crimes against children.
- UNICEF programmes are working to strengthen consular protection for migrant and refugee children – including those who are apprehended or detained in transit. These programmes have helped develop child-sensitive interview techniques for consular officials to detect children's protection needs and give them information about their rights and options. UNICEF has worked with consular offices to make sure they are able to provide psychosocial support, as well.
- UNICEF supports initiatives that aim to provide children on the move with legal identification documents to help protect against violence,
- Along migration routes in the region, UNICEF works with shelters to provide tools and training on psychosocial 'first aid' for migrant and refugee children, including child-friendly materials on avoiding risks and where to seek help, if necessary. In countries of origin, UNICEF programmes raise local awareness about the risks of irregular migration and its impact on children, families and communities.
- Continue to mobilize a regional approach to international protection and to address the child-specific root causes of migration, to build on the interconnected nature of migration movements and policy responses in the region.
- support children who continue their residence in the country of origin while their parents have migrated.
- Further invest in countries of origin to improve access to services, prevent and respond to violence, and create education and livelihood opportunities for vulnerable children, young people, and families, and
- Continue to expand safe and regular migration pathways for children and families, including family reunification mechanisms, while upholding the right to territorial asylum. Children and families should be allowed to enter a state's territory in order to apply for asylum and be able to remain there for the duration of asylum proceedings.



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Chile, 2022

- Ensure that screening processes in regional or border processing centers are carried out in coordination with service providers so that the needs of children and families are identified and access to critical services, such as child protection services, is not overlooked.
- Strengthen child-sensitive border and reception processes that are led by child protection authorities at the earliest possible stage, implement child-specific safeguards, preserve family unity including for children traveling with their non-parental caregivers, and ensure access to legal services.
- Prioritize family- and community-based care and case management and non-custodial measures. Children should not be detained in adult facilities and cannot be separated from their families.
- Invest in strong national child protection systems to safeguard all children, including migrant and refugee children, from exploitation and violence, ensuring compliance with adequate procedures to determine their best interests, and promote safe border crossing.
- Ensure all children on the move have access to the necessary identity, citizenship and legal status documentation throughout the migration journey. Ensure that all migrants and refugees can register their vital events (e.g., birth, marriage) in the national civil registration in the country where it occurred. Having an identity is necessary to prevent statelessness, allow for safe and regular migration, facilitate access to services and social protection, and protect children from trafficking and other forms of violence.
- Ensure children and families have comprehensive access to basic services such as education, social protection, WASH, health and nutrition, in transit, once they are settled in host communities and if returned.
- Continue expanding options for regularizing the legal status of child migrants and their parents or caregivers, moving from a 'temporary status' to a 'permanent status,' building on the momentum of several recent regularization programmes implemented in the region. The adults caring for children should not be overlooked in the design of regularization measures, as their own status has a direct impact on the realization of the rights, well-being and development outcomes of the children in their care.
- Combat xenophobia and discrimination, and ensure families on the move can integrate, access jobs and livelihoods, and participate in all aspects of community life.
- Ensure child-sensitive return and reintegration support for children for whom returning to their country of origin is determined to be safe and in their best interests. Children should never be returned to situations where their lives or well-being are at risk.
- Involve and consult migrant and refugee populations, including children and youth, in planning stages and throughout implementation of all responses to migration and displacement, ensuring that their views and needs are taken into account, and that they receive an adequate and timely response.

UNICEF stands ready to reinforce efforts by governments, non-governmental organizations, foundations, United Nations agencies and other partners to meet the needs of children and young people on the move across LAC. UNICEF's advocacy efforts reflect the conviction that migrant and refugee children are children first, regardless of their migration status.



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