

Venezuelan Human Mobility Report XVII: Mixed Analysis of Risks and Vulnerabilities along the Route (OUTBOUND AND RETURN MOBILITY IN 2025).



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Group of people on the move, consisting of two women, one man and 4 children, walking along the trans-Andean highway or Trunk Road N°. 7 that leads from San Antonio del Táchira, Bolívar municipality to Capacho, Libertad municipality, both in Táchira State.

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The Memory of Cold on a Dangerous and Unsupported Route: The Cost of Seeking a Dignified Life

Luis and his partner knew how difficult the way back to Venezuela would be, having already trekked it on their way to Peru—where more than 1,650,000 Venezuelans still live. This time, they began their journey with their 5-year-old and their 10-month-old children, after failing to reach their goal: a dignified life. But, truthfully, they had forgotten the bone-chilling cold and how hard it was to breathe at 3,200 meters¹ of elevation. The Páramo de Berlín in Santander, department of Colombia, can plunge to temperatures as low as -15 degrees Celsius², and this, combined with the low caloric intake, has claimed the lives of hundreds of Venezuelans who attempted to cross it. The páramo³ is as natural as it is deadly: in just a couple of days, it claimed the lives of 17 people that tried to cross it either to enter or leave the heart of Colombia.

Luis and his family had forgotten the roughness and hardness of the sidewalks where they lay so many sleepless nights, the threat of cars speeding along non-pedestrian roads, as well as the fear of their children being snatched away in the darkness, as they succumbed to the accumulated fatigue after walking for nearly 40 days.

What remained vivid in their minds was the fear of encountering *hinchas*⁴, highway robbers. They can be identified wearing sports jerseys, and they share a common code when committing crimes: they don't rob or kill fellow countrymen. These so called "fans", armed with machetes, carry out their crimes: robbing, raping, and throwing from cargo trucks those who cling to whatever little strength they have left traveling on the roads of Antioquia, Santander, and Norte de Santander in Colombia. Luis had already seen some of his countrymen die in such encounters. So, when the fans boarded the cargo truck where he and his family were stowing away, they boldly demanded his bag. He didn't hesitate to choose his life over his young daughter's clothes and documents.

Luis and his family's destination is Maracay, in the state of Aragua, a journey of 689 kilometers. Luis's story is unique, and yet it is also the story of many Venezuelans. He walked back, like so many others, more than 3,300 kilometers⁵ at the mercy of danger, violence, and hunger; exposed, along with his family, to all kinds of risks that left them with physical and psychological trauma. Luis is not guaranteed to reach his destination safely, but he does have an undiminished will to start again...



¹Translator's Note: 10,500 feet.

²T.N: 5 degrees fahrenheit.

³T.N: A high-altitude, neotropical, ecosystem located in the Andes Mountains between the treeline and the snowline, its landscape looks similar to a Mooreland.

⁴T.N: Term commonly used in Latin America to describe a sports team supporter or fan.

⁵T.N: 2,500 miles.



Returned men aged 42 and 18; they came from Cúcuta, Norte de Santander department, Colombia and were heading towards San Felipe, Yaracuy State, Venezuela.

■ Introduction

The trend in Venezuelan human mobility in 2025 was return migration, representing 80% of migration, compared to outbound migration. Venezuelan human mobility is a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by active displacements and flows that transcend the unidirectionality traditionally described in literature. During 2025, alongside persistent outbound migration, a critical and sustained increase in return migration was recorded, along with multiple displacements. In this context, returnees faced structural barriers and specific protection risks, exacerbated by the use of dangerous maritime routes due to the closure of land borders, or by walking along paths unsuitable for pedestrians. This precarious situation, coupled with irregular migration status, acted as a catalyst for protection risks such as human trafficking, gender-based violence, robbery and forced separation from family and children.

Within this framework, the Observatorio de Investigaciones Sociales en Frontera (Social Research Observatory on the Border, ODISEF) examined the mobility dynamics of people crossing the border corridor between Táchira State, Venezuela, and Norte de Santander Department, Colombia, to enter or leave Venezuela. A mixed-methods approach was used to identify sociodemographic profiles of migrants, protection risks, and unmet necessities along the route. The analysis provides a diagnosis of assistance gaps along the route used by migrants leaving and returning to Venezuela.

The study also revealed the various reasons for migration that compel people to travel on foot, despite the harsh environment and the limited or nonexistent support available along the migration route. The data analyzed determined that men make up the majority of the migrant population, and that women assume leadership roles within groups and the responsibility for children and adolescent care on the move.

ODISEF assisted 12,050 migrants between January and December 2025, of whom 83.1% were returning migrants and 16.8% were outbound. The mixed-methods approach used in this research was based on a quantitative analysis of 1,825 surveys, the data from which were collected during the same period using KoboToolbox and processed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The qualitative component employed a phenomenological design based on 23 semi-structured interviews analyzed using ATLAS.ti, the narratives of which were obtained between July and August 2025. Both data collection efforts took place at assistance points for migrants located in La Pedrera, Libertador Municipality, and in the San José Obrero Parish, Torbes Municipality, both in Táchira State.

■ People on the Move: A Vulnerable Population Group

The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019) explains that migrants in vulnerable situations “cannot effectively enjoy their human rights, are at greater risk of suffering violations and abuses, and therefore have the right to claim greater protection from rights guarantors” (IOM, 2019, p. 140). Human vulnerability is considered a state in which an individual faces a greater risk of experiencing adverse impacts or harm, a phenomenon that transcends personal characteristics and is closely intertwined with the context in which the person lives; this condition is not limited exclusively to individual attributes, but incorporates environmental influences that modulate exposure to threats (Feito, 2007).

In this sense, migrant populations represent a highly vulnerable group, influenced by factors such as a lack of financial resources, a predominance of individuals between 20 and 39 years of age with employment aspirations, and travel patterns in family groups (Vivas-Franco et al., 2025; Rivas-Hidalgo et al., 2025). During their journeys, women face greater risks, including gender-based violence, recruitment in criminal activities, and negative coping strategies due to economic necessity (Asociación Venezolana para una Educación Sexual Alternativa, 2023). Irregular migration status in host countries exacerbates this vulnerability, as do low levels of education (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2024), manifested in adults with only primary education and a lack of schooling among children and adolescents, which fosters child labor and informal employment among adults. The lack of regularization in receiving countries intensifies the precariousness of migrants, combined with the demographic composition of the groups (Ruiz et al., 2023).

Individual vulnerability in migration contexts arises from a combination of factors, encompassing mobility processes, living conditions in host countries, and the gender and health of migrants. However, these are not the only determining factors, as people do not possess inherent fragility; rather, it is the lack of adequate access to protection mechanisms that generates discrimination and human rights violations (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.). Most of the people described in this report undertake the migration process without a passport, a circumstance that prevents them from achieving regular immigration status in host countries. This translates into barriers to accessing rights and services, highlighting the vulnerabilities inherent in low levels of education and lack of regular immigration status (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2024). Sex is also another element that intensifies exposure to risk among migrants, especially in scenarios where forms of discrimination and violence emerge for those who are part of a displacement that does not take place in an orderly or protected manner (IOM, n.d.).

Children and adolescents face high vulnerability to risks such as human trafficking, labor and sexual exploitation, exacerbated by their young age and the consequences of their own invisibility and that of the adults in their care, resulting from a lack of identity documents and irregular immigration status in destination

countries. Consequently, they are frequently forced to accept precarious and inadequate jobs that hinder their development. The more precarious the conditions under which human mobility occurs, the greater the level of exposure to dangers (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Inter-American Development Bank, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre, 2003). Lack of access to education is a factor that further exposes children and adolescents to threats: another study shows that 85.4% of returned children and adolescents were not enrolled in school before beginning the return process. This context not only limits the integral development of children and adolescents, but could also weaken family ties, by increasing exposure to risks such as child labor, exploitation and violence (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2025a).

Human mobility also increases people's exposure to conditions that heighten their vulnerability, particularly when it involves crossing multiple international borders, coupled with the lack of a passport, which promotes transit along unauthorized routes. In these scenarios, people on the move face risks such as human trafficking, exacerbated by a lack of financial resources and the inability to meet essential needs, such as adequate food. These overland journeys generate deprivations that compromise personal safety, demonstrating that the lack of economic means acts as a primary catalyst for exploitation (Fuentes et al., 2022).

■ Protection and Care for People on the Move

All people on the move deserve comprehensive protection by virtue of their human condition as holders of fundamental rights, given their exposure to imminent risks and violations. This protection is essentially justified by the inherent dignity of every individual, a dignity exacerbated in contexts of mobility where threats such as abuse and unforeseen dangers prevail. All of this demands interventions for the respect and promotion of universal rights without exception (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). Human dignity constitutes an intrinsic and inalienable quality that characterizes the individual by their capacity to make decisions and fulfill responsibilities. This inviolability implies that no external agent can diminish this dignity, and it recognizes that the rights inherent to each person maintain equal value and importance in relation to those of any other (Spaemann, 1988).

Therefore, it is the responsibility of States to ensure the full exercise and enjoyment of human rights, even in scenarios of migration and human mobility. Authorities must ensure that all persons have access to these rights without any violations. Furthermore, protection and integration policies must allow individuals to meet their basic needs, free from any form of discrimination (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2023). Likewise, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration constitutes an international normative framework that reinforces States' commitment to honoring their international responsibilities and safeguarding the rights of migrants (United Nations, 2018).

It is a reality internationally that migrants lack effective protection guarantees, given that receiving countries implement strict, often exclusionary and discriminatory migration policies. In many scenarios, migration is neither safe nor regulated, forcing people to travel along irregular and high-risk routes that compromise their basic rights and expose them to serious violations. This lack of state support intensifies the vulnerability of individuals to significant threats (Darién Human Mobility Observatory and Other Alternative Routes, 2025).

It is vital that States implement social integration strategies aimed at restoring the protection of migrants' human rights, allowing them to access these rights safely; to achieve this, it is essential to provide effective pathways to migration regularization, which in turn fosters stronger communities with a greater capacity to

adapt to change; these measures ensure the restoration of fundamental guarantees and strengthen social cohesion by promoting equitable and sustainable environments; accessible regularization acts as a pillar to mitigate vulnerabilities and enhance collective resilience in receiving societies (UNHCR, 2024).

Similarly, safeguarding migrants protects them from vulnerabilities such as human trafficking, since adequate coverage allows them to access genuine and safe employment options, free from discrimination, extortion, bribery or physical and psychological abuse; this measure mitigates risks inherent to human mobility and fosters enabling environments where migrants can integrate without fear of rights violations (ProLAC, 2025a).

■ Metodología

This research has a mixed approach: it combines the analysis of quantitative data with the interpretation of accounts from people on the move to comprehensively understand the dynamics to which they are exposed during the migration process, which entails protection risks, other dangers and unmet needs that exacerbate their vulnerabilities.

For the collection of quantitative data, a structured survey was administered to outbound and returning individuals during their process and who receive assistance at the service point located in the San José Obrero Parish, part of the Táchira Dioceses, in San Josecito, in the Torbes Municipality of Táchira State. Data collection was carried out using the KoboToolbox platform, and structured questionnaires were administered to a total of 1,825 returning individuals and 582 departing individuals, all of whom were adults and volunteer participants who provided their informed consent. The questionnaire incorporated questions adapted from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (Survey on Migration at the Northern Border of Mexico, EMIF Norte), designed by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al., 2020. Among other variables, special consideration was given to those stipulating sociodemographic characteristics, reasons for leaving and returning, origin and destination, and expectations regarding their stay and eventual departure or return.

To process the survey results, the data from the different questions were cleaned to verify their integrity and validity. This involved reviewing internal consistencies in code validation, data types and ranges, restriction validation, and detecting outliers and/or missing values. SPSS software was used to analyze bivariate descriptive statistics for variables such as reasons for migration, educational level, countries of origin/destination, and reported situations of abuse. A diverse sample was included, allowing for the disaggregation of some quantitative⁶ data by sex.

The qualitative phase of the research was framed on a phenomenological design to explore the perspectives of people on the move regarding how they perceive and cope with the inherent dangers of their journeys. Twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data: 14 with returning migrants and 9 with migrants leaving their country. The interview model allowed participants to elaborate

⁶ Those instances exhibiting a material variance are disaggregated and presented separately.



A 22-year-old woman who had returned from Ecuador, traveling with her partner, also 22 years old, and their two daughters, ages 15 days and 2 years, were traveling from Ecuador to Maracay, Aragua State, Venezuela.

on their responses in a detailed and spontaneous manner. The flexible interview guide facilitated the adaptation of questions to the flow of the conversation, thus enhancing the quality of the data obtained.

The participants of the study were 14 returnees (4 women and 10 men) coming from Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, aged between 18 and 61 years; and 9 outbound individuals (3 women and 6 men) from the Venezuelan states of Bolívar, Cojedes, Portuguesa, Yaracuy, and Capital District, aged between 21 and 49 years, who walked along the border corridor between Táchira State, Venezuela, and Norte de Santander Department, Colombia, en route to Colombia and Ecuador. The selection criteria were: individuals on the move over 18 years of age who had experienced risks along the route and who agreed to participate in the semi-structured interview through informed consent.

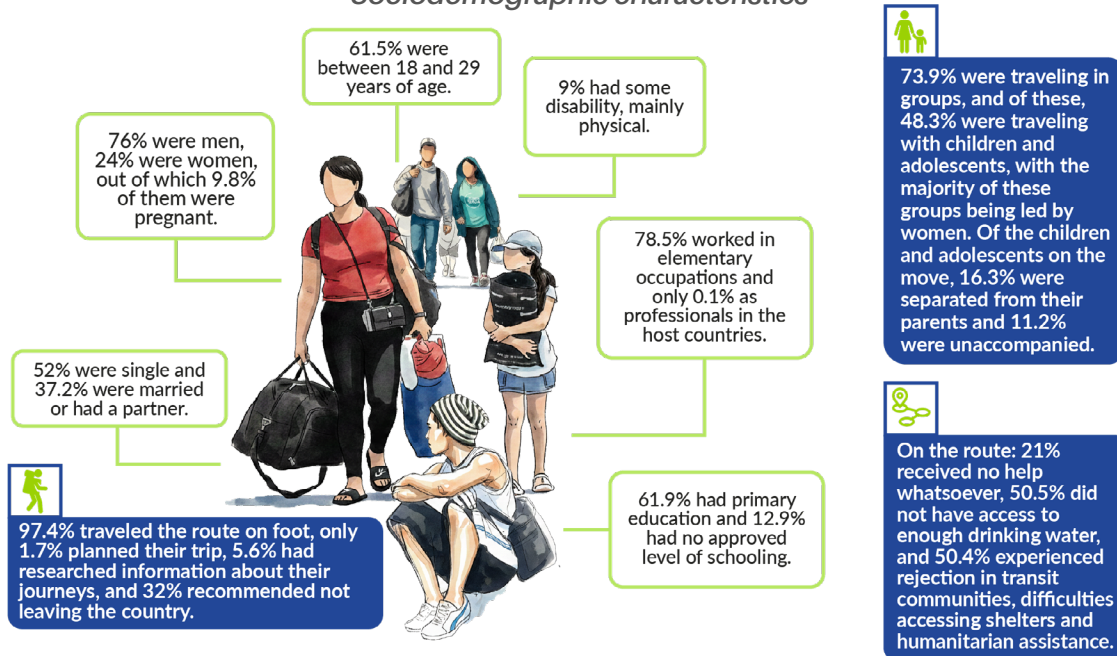
The interviews were conducted after receiving assistance at La Pedrera and the San José Obrero Parish service points in the Libertador municipality and in the Torbes municipality respectively, both in Táchira State, from July 29 to August 30, 2025. Based on theories and documentation related to protection risks along the migration route, a deductive-inductive procedure was used for data analysis. Each recorded interview was transcribed and its texts were cleaned. Alphanumeric codes were assigned to fragments of these transcriptions to protect the collected information and anonymize the participants. This coding method allows for the analysis of experiences related to the 15 protection risks described and detailed by the Global Protection Cluster, using the ATLAS.ti software.

Results

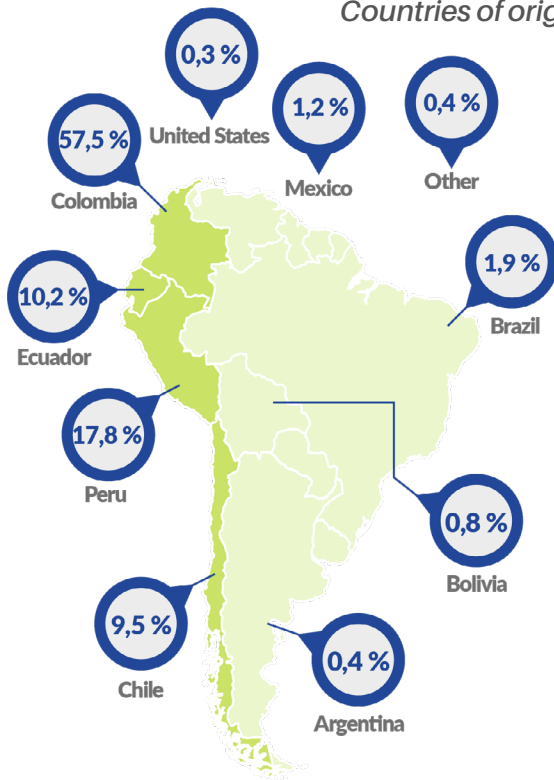
RETURNING PERSONS

The number of returning persons surveyed was 1,825. Although the return was sustained throughout the year and represented the trend of Venezuelan human mobility in 2025, it was recorded with special emphasis in the months of February, May and November.

Sociodemographic characteristics

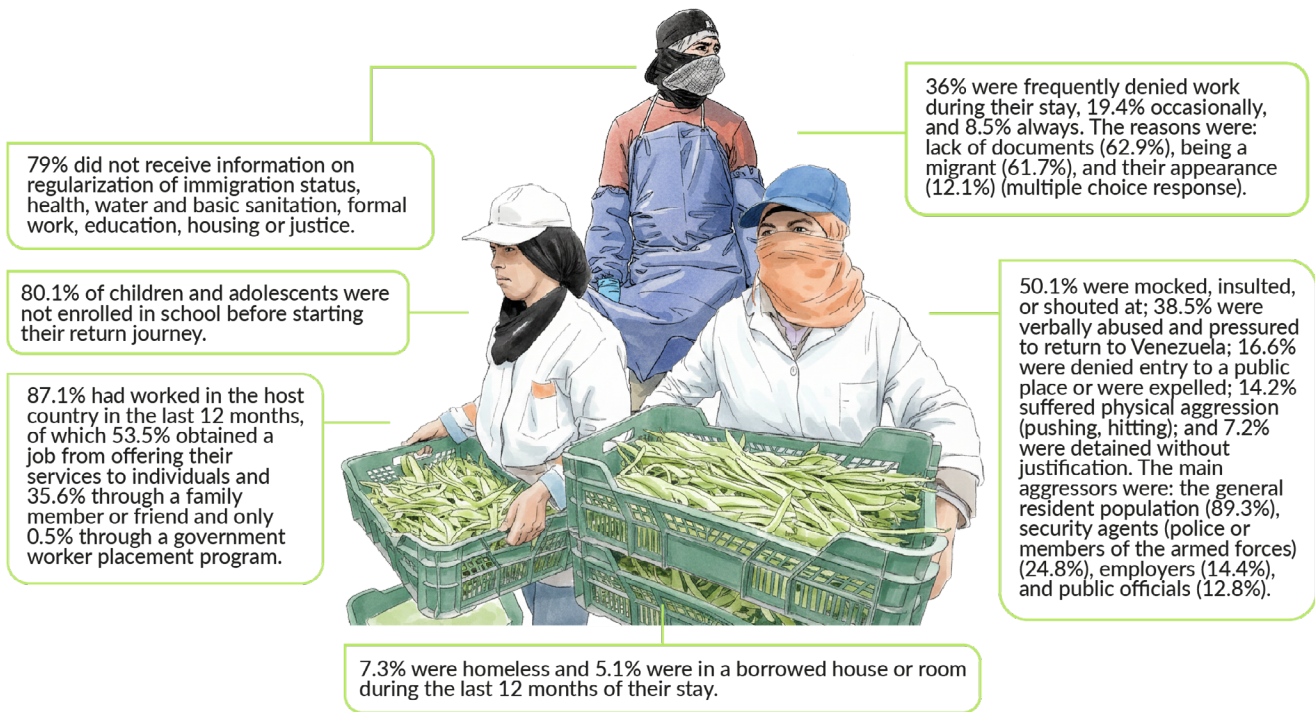


Countries of origin of the returnees



Source: Prepared by the author based on data from ODISEF January-December 2025.

Experiences in host countries



Source: Prepared by the author based on data from ODISEF January-December 2025.

Identity Documents and Legal Status

Only 12.5% of returnees had applied for temporary protection permits; of these, 48.6% did so to change jobs, 27.6% to improve their income, and 19% to access health or education services; 62.9% of applicants were approved. The low permit application rate also reflects the informational and administrative barriers faced by migrants, especially those with lower levels of education or in informal employment (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2023).

Similarly, 98.9% of people did not apply for refugee status or asylum abroad, reinforcing the limited level of information about international protection mechanisms. Among those who did apply, the lack of response from the relevant authorities is prevalent, contributing to discouragement and a perception of lack of access to effective protection. Overall, these results show that the return trend is developing within a context of structural vulnerability and limited access to formal regularization and protection mechanisms. Of the 87.5% who did not apply, 42.3% did not meet the requirements, 31% were unaware of the process, 8.7% lacked the financial resources to complete the procedures, and 18% did not consider it worthwhile.

84.8% of those who returned from Peru did not obtain identity documents during their stay in that country. The same was true for 92.9% of those who returned from Chile.

Regarding documentation, 48% only had an identity card at the time of the survey, 0.5% had a passport, and 42.1% had no identity document. Of this percentage, 56.1% reported having lost their documents and 47.1% reported that they had been stolen (multiple-choice response).

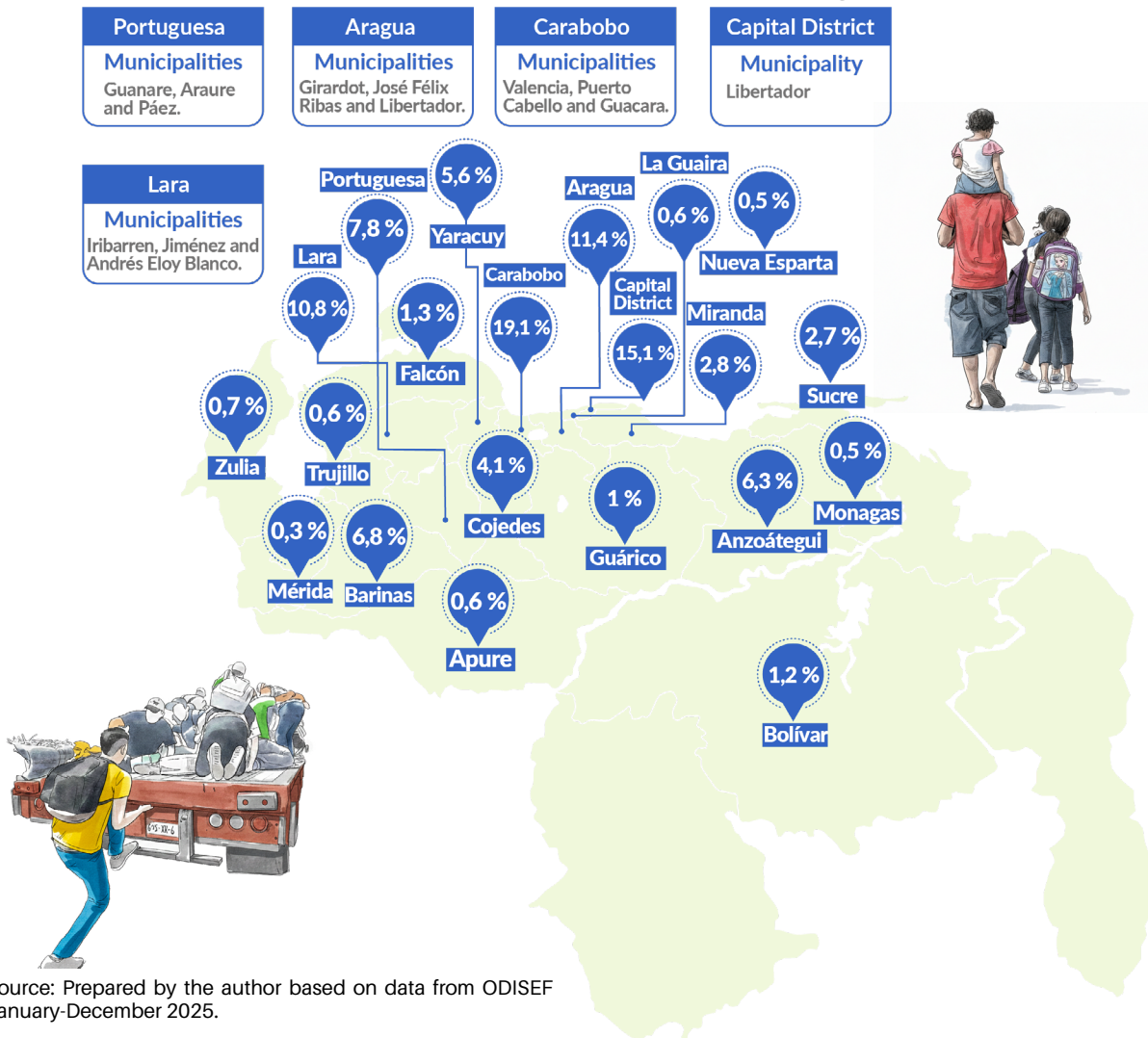
42.8% had experienced a risky or abusive situation on their journey. These included robbery (54.6%), fights or altercations (20%), and extortion (8.9%). The perpetrators were identified as irregular armed groups (23.2%) and civilians (17.8%). The countries where these abuses were most prevalent were Colombia (84%), Venezuela (6.3%), Ecuador (4.4%), and Peru (3.2%).

Reasons for Return

51.2% returned to the country for family reunification, 30.5% due to lack of work or insufficient income, and 7.3% because they had difficulties integrating into the host society. 13.3% of those surveyed stated they returned to Venezuela for a period of 3 months, of whom 11.7% returned to find family members and then leave the country again, and 5.6% due to the illness or death of family members.

The main reasons they did not go to another country and returned to Venezuela were: their family is in the country (60.5%), and they prefer to face hardship in Venezuela rather than go to another country (19%). Other important data points are that 36.6% of those who returned indicated that they had family members in the host country, and that 34% of those who returned intended to leave the country again.

Federal Entities⁷ of Destination of the Returning Persons



⁷T.N: The federal entities of Venezuela are the administrative divisions of the country; which are states, capital district, and federal dependencies (islands and archipelagos), and they are further subdivided into municipalities.

Occupational Profiles and Training Necessities

The returnees were mainly headed to: Carabobo (19.1%), Capital District (15.1%), Aragua (11.4%), Lara (10.8%), and Portuguesa (7.8%). 89.4% had support networks at their destination.

69.2% would not have a job in the federal entity they would arrive in, and of these, 76.6% planned to look for one. The remaining 11.2% would not go because they would not be able to find work, and 1.3% because they would receive remittances.

51.7% believed they could work in elementary occupations, 19.2% as service workers and sales people in shops and markets, 12.7% as skilled trades people, operators, and artisans in mechanical arts and other trades, and 11.4% as farmers and skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishing workers. 50% had learned the skill in their host country that enabled them to perform their occupation before returning.

29.9% of those who returned needed to learn a trade to generate income, specifically in: wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, and construction.

Protection Risks along the Return Route

Both men and women reported being aware of the risks they face along the route (82.5%); however, when asked specifically about risks inherent to the route, very low percentages were reported. For example: disappearances of women, girls, and adolescents (10%), trafficking of women, girls, and adolescents (7.4%), illicit trafficking of women, girls, and adolescents (3.8%), and transactional or survival sex (1%). Furthermore, 15.2% of migrants identified cases of exploitation along the route, but 85.3% did not use formal reporting channels.

The lack of awareness of these and other risks inherent to the route leads to greater exposure for returnees who, due to a lack of understanding, are unable to take preventative measures. The same occurred with human trafficking: 42.3% had not heard of it, but 33% of returnees had been offered work or educational opportunities with particularly advantageous conditions. Traffickers tend to recruit men through their communities or circles of friends, while in the case of women, they use social media more frequently (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2025b).

Returnees may face other risks, such as arbitrary and unlawful detention or imprisonment, forced separation from children and family, and psychological or emotional abuse (Rivas-Hidalgo et al., 2025). YM12's account illustrates this:

[My] pregnant wife, so she's coming around like this too because she has a little girl and she left her with her mother, and she's turning sad, crying all the time... she's crying for the girl, so I told her we couldn't bring her, because look how we're doing, if we're having a hard time, I'm not going to make her have a hard time, she's not my daughter, but you understand? The girl isn't going to suffer either (YM12).

...around Río Negro arriving in Medellín there was a lady that had left her husband and her two children on an *mula*⁸ she was crying when she stopped us. I told my buddy to pull over, he pulled over and we caught up with the mula and rescued the children, they were two children, not babies, but around 10 or 11 years old (HC21).

⁸ Eighteen-wheeler truck, usually consisting of a cab and trailer.

Sadness, mostly, because I left my children. I have three other children. Well, I had a problem with my partner, we separated, there in Bogotá. I came here alone. Yes, I plan to return to Bogotá, but not to the place where he is. But not yet, I want to have treatment here first [in Venezuela]... pure sadness, sadness, more than anything pain... (YM16).

There were those who suffered discrimination, as YM12 mentioned:

Others come because they see you like this, dirty, walking around, they think you're a beggar... sometimes you even feel like crying, of course, you feel... for example, here in, what's it called again? in Río, here in San Cristóbal, Río, over there, there in Capacho, there, several times they've denied us food and they've kicked me, the people in the houses, well... It's Venezuelans.

OUTBOUND PEOPLE ON THE MOVE
Sociodemographic Characteristics



<p>66.4% of those who left the country were between 18 and 29 years of age.</p>	<p>73.3% were men and 26.7% were women. 10.9% of the women were pregnant.</p>
<p>61.4% were single and 31.1% were married or had a partner.</p>	<p>48.2% were traveling with children and adolescents.</p>
<p>64.6% had only a primary school education.</p>	<p>97.5% did not have a passport and 22% did not carry any identity document (multiple choice answer). Of these latter individuals, 77.6% explained that they did not have documents with them due to loss and 18.9% due to theft.</p>
<p>61.2% were unemployed before beginning their journey. Of the 38.8% who were employed, 73.1% were in elementary occupations.</p>	

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from ODISEF January-December 2025.

People on the move leaving the country came mainly from Carabobo (21.6%), Capital District (13.7%), Portuguesa (13.3%), Aragua (8.5%), and Yaracuy (6.5%). They were heading to Colombia (72.7%), Peru (13.2%), Ecuador (8%), and Chile (5.3%). 24.2% would have nowhere to stay in these countries, 43.4% lacked support networks, and 41.5% would have work upon arrival, but of those, 86.1% would be in the informal sector. 33.6% lacked information on the procedure for regularizing their immigration status in the destination country. 58.3% estimated they would remain in the host country for more than a year.

7.9% had experienced some type of risk or abuse along the route, specifically: robbery (59.3%), fights or brawls (28.4%), and extortion (16%). The perpetrators were civilians (82.1%), irregular armed groups (14.1%), and law enforcement agents (7.7%).

28.9% of outbound people had already done so in the last year. At that time, the destination countries were: Colombia (74%), Peru (10.5%), Ecuador (8.4%), and Chile (4.1%). They returned for family reunification (64.9%), because they didn't have enough money (15.5%), and due to unemployment (4.7%).

Dangers and Necessities of People on the Move

There are other risks that lurk for people in both types of mobility: walking on roads not designed for pedestrian traffic, as explained by YM12: "I was coming to Barinas in the middle of the night, around 10 at night, walking and walking and a car tried to hit me, I had to jump into the woods." EA14 also detailed that "...if you're riding in the back of a truck and you fall asleep when fatigue takes over, you might fall asleep, you might fall off. You can't walk at night because suddenly they don't see you, they run you over, you go down one of those ditches never to be seen again."

The journey there is awful, it's truly horrible, and the return trip is too because it's by sea. The boat did like this [it rocked]. Sometimes we had to sleep on an island, and we were scared too. Because they put you there, there's nothing for you to stay in, just the seashore. At least in Jaqué... but it gets bad when the waves get big. The last time they did a high tide *asimilo*⁹ [drill] (...) something like that, and they ordered everyone to get out (...) once it started to rain, the boat kept moving and it got stuck in the sea for five days. We were stuck there for five days with rain and storms, there were 12 of us. When we got to Buenaventura, immigration caught us, and from there we went in... to Bogotá, and from Bogotá I just came here [to Venezuela]. And there was a snake, but it wasn't a snake, I didn't even see what it was, but it was really ugly and it started circling the boat when it stopped and it stayed there for a while, until we left. Also, when we were arriving in Buenaventura they told us that sometimes they kill people when they have nothing to give them, the *maracos*¹⁰ or something like that, the *paracos* [paramilitaries], the *paracos*, or *maracos*, something like that. Yes, they would kill you, they would rob the boat (YM16).

Simultaneously, migrants experience marked precarity, due in part to unmet necessities along their routes, a circumstance that also exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. These necessities are diverse, with food being the most pressing, affecting 80% of all migrants. Others include food (80%), transportation (77.3%), lodging (54%), documentation and healthcare (22% each), communication stations or points (20.5%), and clothing (15.4%).

⁹ T.N: As in the original. A misspell for similo, which means "simulation".

¹⁰ T.N: Mispronunciation of paracos, which is the colloquial term to refer to paramilitary groups in Colombia.

Even water is denied along the route: "At least they could help us with a *perolita*¹¹ of water" (HC21). "Sometimes they don't even give us water. Well, they deny us water quite often. That's been in houses; it can be a business establishment, 'we don't have water'..." (YM16).

Because sometimes you ask for water and they refuse to give you some. Several times you have to ask for food because you don't have any along the way... 'No, I don't have any' they kick you out. That has happened to me, but there's nothing you can do. What can you do? Keep going, pray to God, because that's the only thing I can do. (YM12).

The lack of transportation is critical and in turn creates a necessity for accommodation: "...because one arrives in a state of homelessness, because one has to sleep on the street." (AG03). "Spaces [are required] for people to rest, because not everyone is lucky enough to get a ride from Valencia to San Cristóbal; many have to walk." (JU09). On their part, YM12 explained: "If I can't get a ride, or a car, I'll lie down. I'll look for a place, a little overhang to cover, somewhere I can lie down and spend the night... not sleep, just spend the night..."

Well, when night fell, I would look for a place to sleep, and like I said, since I'm a bit of a street warrior, I defended myself with what I know, I'd lie down on a couple of pieces of cardboard somewhere... When I got to Medellín, there was a Venezuelan family looking for a place to sleep, and the guys from the block came out and told them not here, that this and that, harass them, and they shot at them (HC21).

Faced with a lack of transportation, some people on the move employ various coping strategies:

Mula and sometimes I make a few coins here and there selling a pack of lollipops, anything to pay for bus fare. *Mulas* and buses... the most dangerous means of transport are *mulas*. That's the most dangerous transport there is, they flip over, they crash, anything can happen and you get thrown out of that thing, but it's the most used by Venezuelans and Colombians too (AG03).

Strategies are also applied in response to food shortages, but not all of them are successful:

...sometimes we go into a place and spend almost the whole day without eating until night, we find a *mula* all day until the driver stops, so we can look for any way to ask anyone in a restaurant for a soup for the girl... there are some who do refuse... you say: *madre*¹², can you give me a little bit of something to eat? 'No, I don't have anything' and the display cases are full of pastries... (AG03).

¹¹ Metal pot.

¹² T.N: *madre*, while its literal translation is "mother", is commonly used to address a woman in Colombia and Venezuela when asking or begging for something, similar to "ma'am" in English.

■ Conclusions

The profile of returnees in 2025 was defined by youth and a predominance of men (61.5% between 18 and 29 years of age; 76% men), with a structural vulnerability stemming from low levels of education and precarious work experience in host countries. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis revealed that this migration flow is conditioned by forced separation from children and family, as well as protection risks along the route, such as a high burden of psychological and emotional abuse. Testimonies showed that the return occurs under conditions of survival, generating anxiety and migration-related grief. This reality, coupled with the fact that 42.1% lacked identity documents and 80.1% of children and adolescents were not in school, positions psychological distress and educational disadvantage as barriers to any attempt at reintegration. For reintegration to be sustainable and become an effective programmatic action, it is imperative to address the psychosocial dimension (Lobo-Contreras et al., 2025). Although there is potential for productive integration (50% acquired technical skills in host countries), it is important to remember that the desire to re-emigrate persists in one-third of the surveyed population.

The profile of those surveyed who were outbound in 2025 is characterized by their youth and low technical qualifications: 66.4% of emigrants were young people between 18 and 29 years of age, predominantly male (73.3%). There may be a correlation between their low level of education (64.6% with only primary school education), the fact that 61.2% were unemployed before undertaking the emigration process, and the lack of a passport in 97.5% of cases, which foreshadows, from the outset, an irregular immigration status in host countries. The flow originates mainly from the central region (Carabobo and Capital District) and is primarily heading towards Colombia (72.7%). From a programmatic perspective, re-emigration stands out: 28.9% of those leaving had already emigrated and returned in the last year. Vulnerability is exacerbated by a lack of protection



The bicycle was ridden by a 38-year-old returnee, who was traveling with his 23-year-old partner and 6-year-old son. They were traveling from Cúcuta, Norte de Santander department, Colombia, and were heading towards La Guaira state, Venezuela.

at their destination: 43.4% lacked support networks, and among those who expected to be employed, 86.1% projected working in the informal sector. Transit represents a latent physical risk, with incidents of robbery (59.3%) and extortion perpetrated mainly by civilians and irregular groups. Furthermore, 48.2% of groups travel with children and adolescents, in addition to 10.9% of pregnant women. 33.6% of those who left had no information about regularization.

All migrants, both returning and leaving, face protection risks due to a lack of identity documents along their journey. This creates obstacles to exercising fundamental rights and accessing services in host countries, exacerbating the vulnerability and lack of protection for people in transit.

There are established migration routes that are considered highly dangerous. These routes are plagued by incidents of various kinds that threaten the safety of migrants, and, coupled with unmet necessities, exacerbate the vulnerability of those who travel along them.

Securitization does not stop human mobility. A comprehensive approach to addressing Venezuelan migration is urgently needed from the perspective of neighboring states. Thinking and acting as a region in integration and monitoring processes is fundamental to humanizing comprehensive solutions. Without an approach based on regional and multilateral parameters, isolated efforts reduce efficiency and positive impacts.

Women on the move bear a disproportionate burden of vulnerability when traveling as group leaders and caregivers for children and adolescents. This exposes them to negative coping strategies and makes them targets of hypersexualization and objectification, risks they themselves identify as constant.

There is an alarming disconnect between the imminent risk of trafficking and the perception that migrants have of that risk along their routes. This gap in technical information is the greatest asset trafficking networks have in recruiting victims who do not recognize the danger.

Returning migrants is not proving to be a lasting solution. Local reintegration is highly fragile because returnees have no guarantee of employment in their host communities, among other things. This can lead to multiple displacements, making mobility a survival strategy rather than a permanent option.

■ Recommendations

To the Venezuelan State:

Design and allocate resources for development:

- **Support and assistance program for returnees to promote their sustainable reintegration.** Among other dimensions, it should be based on a reference system that links returned persons with mechanisms for certification of technical skills acquired in host countries and livelihoods (employment/entrepreneurship).
- **Mental health response program and psychosocial care for return.** To enable primary healthcare personnel to identify and manage post-traumatic stress and chronic stress related to migration-related grief. The program should operate under a trauma-informed care approach, guarantee safe spaces that prioritize emotional stabilization and the destigmatization of return, mobilize specialized psychological care for critical cases, and connect with community support networks to strengthen the resilience and social cohesion of returnees in host communities.

To transit and host States

- **Establish and strengthen service points for people on the move in porous border areas.** State presence should be for both migration control and to identify vulnerable profiles immediately, aimed at their protection.
- **Establish regulatory mechanisms with a focus on durability.** Migrate from temporary permits to schemes that allow for long-term regularization. This includes simplifying requirements for academic degrees and making tuition payments more flexible.
- **Design and promote campaigns to humanize migration.** With the technical objective of combating xenophobia, a protection risk that segregates and pushes migrants to the margins of society and makes them vulnerable to trafficking networks. The transition from rejection to empathy and social cohesion must be promoted.

To organizations working with the Venezuelan State

- Design awareness campaigns about the risk of human trafficking. The campaigns should be specific about the modus operandi of trafficking networks. Both analog and digital channels should be used to achieve better reach.
- Raising awareness about the risks and precarious conditions along the route. To reduce reliance on informal information and mitigate exposure to human trafficking networks and migrant smuggling.
- To make unmet necessities visible. To provide technical evidence that the lack of basic services and assistance points for migrants places people on the move in a critically vulnerable situation. Advocacy efforts must argue that the lack of humanitarian infrastructure pushes vulnerable populations toward clandestine routes and exploitation networks, increasing their vulnerability to criminal groups. A comprehensive response is imperative.

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