



Mechanisms that strengthen integration: Migrant networks and residence permits in migratory processes¹

*Results of a qualitative study of Venezuelan migrants to Colombia in the context of COVID-19**

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Key Findings

- » The motivations driving migration are diverse. COVID-19 has not changed these motivations but has amplified the needs of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia.
- » Residence permits (PEP-RAMV) allowed more livelihood security and well-being among Venezuelan migrants. However, in the absence of clear and timely information during the formalization process, misinformation circulated widely.
- » Migrant networks are crucial for both material and emotional support. These networks endured through the pandemic. This underscores the importance of strengthening community support networks consisting of family, neighbors, friends, NGOs, and migrant organizations.

¹ The opinions and interpretations in this paper are strictly those of the authors and should not be attributed to Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (IDB), its Executive Directors, or its member countries.

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SAMPLE

42 interviews

STUDY TYPE

Qualitative research

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Introduction

Over the last decade, about 5.1 million Venezuelans have left their country.² Colombia has received more of these migrants than anywhere else. By June 2020, the Colombian Government identified close to 1.74 million Venezuelans within its borders, of which approximately 986,000 are undocumented persons.³ This population has diverse socioeconomic characteristics, although the majority of migrants are of working age, seeking income for themselves and their families.⁴

The social crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of Venezuelan migrants. What mechanisms contribute to the well-being of this population? This

policy brief highlights migrant networks⁵ and the possibility of accessing a residence permit (PEP-RAMV)⁶ as factors that facilitate the migration process in Colombia, allowing greater social and economic integration of the migrant population into Colombian society and having a positive effect on their well-being.

To explore the potential impact of these mechanisms, this policy brief provides an overview of (i) the importance of migrant networks and the PEP-RAMV during migratory processes, (ii) the distinctions between these mechanisms, and (iii) how both mechanisms mitigate the household impacts of COVID-19.

Methodology

The information was collected through in-depth interviews, which enabled access to reflections on migrants' own reality. This offers valuable information because the interviews are embedded in relevant social and historical dynamics.⁷ For this study, researchers interviewed 42 migrants living in cities receiving a high population of Venezuelans. All interviewees had resided in Colombia since 2018, as this was the year in which the PEP-RAMV was enacted. In detail, the interviewees were: (i) beneficiaries of the Special Permit of Permanence granted by the Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants (PEP-RAMV or PEP 3), as well as (ii) migrants who could have benefited from this permit, but for some reason, were not registered in the RAMV or (iii) were unable to access the PEP despite having participated in the census. The general profile of the participants was young people with difficulties generating income, despite being of working age, who lived in large households and were mostly women.⁸ This sample ensures rich and diverse information.

Due to COVID-19, all interviews took place remotely.⁹ Following the interviews, researchers processed the data and applied various quality measures.¹⁰ To ensure the robustness of findings, researchers carried out a continuous contrast with secondary sources,¹¹ triangulation through different methods, as well as a review of central elements on the theory of networks in migratory contexts.¹²

Policy Context

One of the main supports granted by the Colombian government is the Special Permit of Permanence (PEP). This document grants a residence permit to Venezuelan citizens, which is valid for two years and can be renewed. In addition to temporary residence, the PEP allows beneficiaries to access formal labor markets, the healthcare system, and the education system. The delivery of this identification document has occurred in nine phases with some variations in the application conditions.¹³ The third phase of the PEP (also called PEP-RAMV or PEP 3) was the only phase to significantly alter the requirements for obtaining the permit. Undocumented migrants who had registered in the Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants (RAMV) that took place between April 6 and June 8, 2018¹⁴ could apply for PEP 3. Unexpectedly, on August 2, 2018, the government reported that registered migrants could request a residence permit—the PEP-RAMV residence permit.¹⁵ The online platform to make this request was open until December 21, 2018. UNHCR data indicates that of the 442,000 people registered in the RAMV,¹⁶ approximately 64 percent of them were registered in the PEP 3.

² Plataforma de Coordinación para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela [RV4]. (2020c). Refugee and Migrant Response Plan 2020. <https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform>

³ Migración Colombia. (2020a). Radiografía Venezolanos en Colombia. <https://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/infografias/venezolanos-en-colombia-corte-a-30-de-junio-de-2020>

⁴ Migrantes venezolanos en Bogotá exigen permiso para viajar a la frontera (2020b, abril 29). La República. <https://www.larepublica.co/economia/migrantes-venezolanos-en-bogota-exigen-permiso-para-viajar-a-la-frontera-2999582>

⁵ Migrant networks are defined as a set of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in areas of origin and destination through kinship, friendship, and a common community of origin (Massey et al., 1993, p. 448).

⁶ Special Residence Permit or *Permiso Especial de Permanencia* (PEP) and Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants or *Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos* (RAMV)

⁷ Creswell, J. (2003). Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. *Social and Administrative Sciences*, 4(2), 205-207. <http://ksjournals.org/index.php/JSAS/article/view/1313>

⁸ 25 women and 17 men took part in the study. None of the participants identified with a non-normative gender category.

⁹ Prior to beginning fieldwork, this study received approval from Innovations for Poverty Action's (IPA) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants received an economic incentive of 40,000 COP (11 USD at exchange rate of February 11, 2021).

¹⁰ By processing, we refer to transcription, coding, and analysis of the information collected. The quality measures applied on a sub-sample were re-codings and double-checking of the audio match with the transcriptions.

¹¹ This is important to situate migrant discourses in existing dynamics that have already

been documented. In this way, the findings can broaden the known perspectives or aspects of the topic.

¹² Essential to understanding the central tenets of this theory was the paper "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal" by Massey et al (1993), where network theory is described in the framework of the explanation of the perpetuation of migratory movements.

¹³ Residence permits, information Migración Colombia (Migración Colombia, 2019): PEP I Resolution 1271 of 2017; PEP II Resolution 0361 of 2018; PEP III Resolution 2033 of 2018; PEP IV Resolution 3317 of 2018; PEP V Resolution 2540 of 2019; PEP VI Resolution 2278 of 2019; PEP VII Resolution 0240 of 2020; PEP VI Resolution 0289 of 2020; PEP IX Resolution 2359 of 2020.

¹⁴ The other requirements to access this program were the following: (i) to be in Colombia at the time the PEP-RAMV was issued; (ii) to NOT have a judicial record in Colombia; (iii) to NOT be wanted by Colombian or international authorities; (iv) to NOT have a deportation or expulsion measure in force. Additionally, once in the RAMV, migrants should register on platforms established by the government as PEP 3 beneficiaries.

¹⁵ Migración Colombia. (2021a, 12 de enero). Todo lo que tiene que saber sobre el PEP y el PEP-RAMV. <https://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/venezuela/pep/preguntas-frecuentes-pep>

¹⁶ El Sistema de las Naciones Unidas en Colombia saluda la medida adoptada por el Gobierno colombiano para regularizar la situación de más de 442.000 venezolanos y venezolanas. Comunicados de prensa (2018, agosto 2). La agencia de la ONU para los refugiados [ACNUR]. <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/press/2018/8/5b647b194/el-sistema-de-las-naciones-unidas-en-colombia-saluda-la-medida-adoptada.html#>



Results

1. Migrant networks as motivation in the arrival processes in Colombia

» **The motivations that drive migratory flows are diverse.** The interviews corroborated the importance of certain motivations for migration, such as insecurity, seeking financial resources and opportunities for children, medical needs, and safety.¹⁷ Moreover, these dialogues identified other phenomena that prompted migration like frequent power cuts, political persecution, and the perception of stability in Colombia. In these interviews, the most prevalent feelings expressed by the participants were anger, frustration, indignation, and nostalgia.

» **The interviews highlighted the importance of having migrant acquaintances living in Colombia who offer different types of support to newcomers.** Among the most common forms of support were: (i) providing information and recommendations on crossing the border and the regularization process in Colombia; (ii) preparing accommodation and providing food during the first weeks; (iii) lending and/or sending money, especially for bus tickets from the border to the destination cities; (iv) offering opportunities for social integration through links with the local population, government entities, or charitable organizations; (v) sharing job opportunities, and (vi) supporting contact with family and friends in Venezuela through internet connection or cell phone data.

» **These conversations also provided an overview of the internal migration dynamics within Venezuelan**

families. Initially, a member of the household makes a trip to Colombia without their family nucleus or with only some family members. Once they have settled in Colombia with a modest but relatively stable income, they support other relatives or acquaintances—especially children and partners—to make the trip.¹⁸ In this context, migratory flows from Venezuela to Colombia are staggered, gradually increasing over time with the costs and risks borne by those who make the first trip. Thus, those who were unable to travel at first—due to maternity, age, illness, etc.—will come to Colombia later because they know someone who will guide and support them throughout the process.

» **Support networks are a determining factor in promoting physical and emotional well-being during the first weeks in Colombia.** For undocumented migrants, having these networks is especially important for navigating the additional costs and risks associated with crossing through illegal passages. Some interviewees who were undocumented reported arriving in Colombia with little or no money despite having sold some of their belongings in Venezuela to pay for the trip. In addition, some reported paying bribes at the *alcabalas*—Venezuelan police checkpoints—and/or enduring robberies during the *trocha*—the informal term for illegal crossings.¹⁹ One woman interviewed mentioned that land transport companies charge undocumented migrants more, given the supposed risks that transporters face if the police identify undocumented Venezuelans on buses. Consequently, the support they receive from family or friends prevents many migrants from having to sleep in terminals, public squares, or on the street, as was the case of some people interviewed.

¹⁷ Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2019

¹⁸ This pattern can be verified with other studies. A study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) consisting of 22,430 interviews in 16 prioritized municipalities found that about 45 percent of those surveyed stated that they expect to receive acquaintances or relatives in the next three months. The same study indicates migrants who will receive someone await an average of 2.5 people from their family and one additional acquaintance.

Organización Internacional para las Migraciones [OIM Colombia]. (2020). Matriz de seguimiento al desplazamiento (DTM). Recolección de información Colombia. Encuesta DMT - vocación de permanencia de población venezolana en Colombia. https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/01_INFORME%20NARRATIVO%20ENCUESTA%20DTM%20GENERAL_20200701.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9120

¹⁹ On this issue, the NGO FundaRedes denounced the conditions on the border to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Táchira: "Along the border of Apure, Táchira and Zulia, it has been recorded that the police, National Guard and army checkpoints ask travelers for the PCR test to know that they are not positive for COVID-19 as a requirement to allow them to pass, knowing that in this country there are no medical supplies; and since they do not have them, they demand that they pay in dollars or that the women pay with their bodies. Money, valuables, or basic belongings are taken (La Opinión, 2020)."

2. Migrant networks in the context of the issuance of the PEP-RAMV

» **Another motivation for Venezuelan migrants to come to Colombia is to obtain official documentation.**

In most of the nine phases through which the permit was delivered, **access to the PEP has been restricted** primarily for not having a passport stamped by the competent immigration authority and/or not having certificates of future employment in Colombia (PEPFF). Due to the difficulty in obtaining a Venezuelan passport, a considerable number of migrants have not been able to apply for the PEP. Several interviewees reported that the Venezuelan entity in charge of issuing this type of document (SAIME) has lengthy, expensive, and corrupt bureaucratic processes. These phenomena have been documented elsewhere.²⁰ As a result of these difficulties, some Venezuelans made the decision to migrate without a passport.

Initially, the purpose of the RAMV was a census to support humanitarian assistance and expand services.²¹ There was no official notice that the RAMV would be the prerequisite for a massive formalization of migrants. **However, there was an array of rumors in the migrant community about what the census entailed.** The interviews identified rumors that the RAMV would be used by the Colombian government to deport undocumented migrants and that the census would lead to substantial benefits, such as access to the PEP. Regarding possible risks, some of those who decided to do the RAMV mentioned that "they had nothing to lose."

» **Some Venezuelans did not register in the RAMV census due to situations that complicated their registration:** (i) lack of access to information and

weak networks; (ii) lack of money to pay for the cost of transportation to registration points; (iii) the cost of sacrificing part of the working day in an activity that did not represent income; and (iv) lack of incentives to register.

» **Some interviewees could not access the PEP-RAMV permit, despite having been registered in the RAMV.** This was due to: (i) errors during data registration, loss of records, and failures on the website; (ii) long wait times and bureaucratic obstacles;²² and (iii) a lack of unified information provided on the process of accessing the PEP-RAMV.

» **Throughout these processes, migrant networks were essential to publicize both the registration in the RAMV and the subsequent process of accessing the PEP-RAMV.** Some interviews revealed that without physical or virtual contact through social networks with leaders of churches and/or migrant organizations, migrants would have lost the opportunity to regularize their immigration status. Similarly, "word of mouth" among families, friends, and colleagues played a central role in the dissemination of this valuable information.

Finally, in all the testimonies registered in this research, migrants with and without PEP-RAMV affirmed that, once in Colombia, having official documentation is an important element in the migration process.

3. Perception of the effects of the institutional support granted by the PEP-RAMV

The evidence in this policy brief suggests that the need for income is a primary concern when migrating to Colombia. **The PEP-RAMV facilitated access to formal labor**



²⁰ (i) France24, 'EEUU sanciona a altos funcionarios de Venezuela por venta de pasaportes'; (ii) El país, 'La mafia detrás de la diáspora venezolana'.

²¹ Unidad para la Gestión de Riesgos y Desastres [UNGRD]. (2018, 27 de marzo). Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos - RAMV. http://portal.gestiondelriesgo.gov.co/Paginas/Slide_home/Registro-Administrativo-de-Migrantes-Venezolanos-RAMV.aspx

²² The PEP-RAMV was granted by Colombian government. The National Unit for the Management of Risk of Disasters (Unidad Nacional Para La Gestión Del Riesgo De Desastres - UNGRD) implemented the policy. Several local governments provided assistance for developing the registration process. Some participants reported a lack of coordination between the institutions in responding to questions and solving problems migrants faced during registration.

²³ Access to health care for migrants is provided through the SISBEN, which is the main State entity for social protection for vulnerable sectors. However, this process requires some additional documents and procedures.

²⁴ In 2019 the monthly legal minimum wage was 828,116 COP, or approximately 250 USD (for 2019 the average value of the dollar was 3,283 COP).

²⁵ Organización Internacional para las Migraciones [OIM Colombia]. (2020). Matriz de seguimiento al desplazamiento (DTM). Recolección de información Colombia. Encuesta DMT - vocación de permanencia de población venezolana en Colombia.

» **The qualitative evidence suggests that the PEP-RAMV permit assuaged migrants' anxiety and fear due to being undocumented and increased the perception of being supported by the Colombian government.** Likewise, the PEP-RAMV facilitated children and adolescents' access to the education system. The children of undocumented migrants also have the right to access this system, but some public school officials require them to have permit of permanence to enroll, according to some respondents.

Access to formal labor markets was restricted by: (i) discrimination from employers; (ii) the lack of a passport, a requirement during some hiring processes; (iii) difficulty validating university studies done in Venezuela; and (iv) the barriers imposed by some banks to open accounts, given that some financial entities do not recognize the PEP-RAMV as a sufficient document, according to testimonies. Additional information from other sources indicates that the migrant population's access to formal labor markets was precarious in 2019. The bulk of this population received incomes below the legal minimum wage.²⁴ It also highlights a marked gender difference given that men are participating more in the labor market and earning larger incomes.²⁵

4. Migrant networks as support against the social effects of COVID-19

» **The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a global health emergency with profound repercussions on the local economy in 2020.** The consequences of the pandemic and the containment measures taken by the Colombian government have directly and disproportionately affected Venezuelan migrants.²⁶ **The pandemic has also affected the health and livelihoods of migrants through overcrowded living conditions, which prevent them from respecting social distancing.**²⁷

» **The testimonies highlighted three main changes in the lives of families due to the pandemic.** The first and most important of these changes is the **total or partial loss of income**, either due to layoffs, reductions in earnings, or restrictions imposed on informal labor, especially for street vendors.

» The second change is the **transformation of childcare and education dynamics** since the closure of Child Development Centers²⁸ and educational institutions transferred this responsibility to parents. Faced with the impossibility of paying for private nurseries or other care systems, several migrants mentioned that they turned to a gendered division of tasks: the mother takes care of



the children and the father is responsible for generating income. In other cases, migrants working as street vendors have been forced to take their children to work and assume both the risk of contagion as well as the extra costs of buying sanitizing equipment. Some have even received fines for violating quarantine.²⁹

» A third change has been **the spread of xenophobic prejudice** based on the idea that Venezuelans are spreading the virus in Colombia. Other reports have reached similar conclusions about increasing xenophobia against migrants.³⁰

²⁶ Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo [BID] (2020). Políticas sociales en respuesta al Coronavirus; Los mercados laborales de América Latina y el Caribe ante el impacto del COVID-19. <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/Los-mercados-laborales-de-America-Latina-y-el-Caribe-ante-el-impacto-de-COVID-19.pdf>

²⁷ Testaverde, M. (2020, abril 28). Protección social para los migrantes durante la crisis de coronavirus (COVID-19): una decisión apropiada e inteligente. Voces.

²⁸ This is a public institution of the Bogotá government that offers support for children from vulnerable families.

²⁹ One element to take into consideration is that the PEP permit is individual and non-transferable from parents to children or between spouses, so there may be documented and undocumented members in the same household, potentially generating intra-household inequities.

³⁰ Barráez, S. (2020, abril 6). Efecto coronavirus: cientos de personas regresan a Venezuela, país del que buscaban escapar por una crisis que hoy es más profunda. Infobae. <https://www.infobae.com/americas/venezuela/2020/04/06/efecto-coronavirus-cientos-de-personas-regresan-a-venezuela-pais-del-que-buscaban-escapar-de-una-crisis-que-hoy-es-mas-profunda/>

Plataforma de Coordinación para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela [RV4]. (2020a). Colombia: Evaluación rápida de necesidades ante covid-19 mayo 2020.

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³¹ Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo [BID] (2020). Políticas sociales en respuesta al Coronavirus; Los mercados laborales de América Latina y el Caribe ante el impacto del COVID-19. <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/Los-mercados-laborales-de-America-Latina-y-el-Caribe-ante-el-impacto-de-COVID-19.pdf>

³² David Smolansky, OAS Commissioner for the Venezuelan migrant and refugee crisis, states that Venezuelan returnees are mistreated, stigmatized, and threatened. The Commissioner notes that in the State of Táchira, the Governor even took the measure of marking the houses of returnees to avoid contagion (Cabrera, 2020).

» **These three changes have particularly worrying implications for food insecurity, evictions, and deteriorating mental health.** The migrants' accounts revealed that due to falling income, they can eat only one or two meals a day. Added to this is the inability to pay rent. Some landlords have taken a conciliatory position and come to a payment agreement with the migrants. However, other landlords have threatened eviction and even taken measures that violate the right to privacy, such as the removal of doors from the dormitories of migrants with late payments. As a result, the mental health of migrants has been affected. During the interviews, people—especially women with small children—expressed feelings of sadness, uncertainty, and feeling overwhelmed.

» **Informal and institutional support networks among migrants mitigated the negative impacts of the pandemic.** These networks have mobilized to provide shelter, food, and other emergency services for the most vulnerable people. For example, several interviewees mentioned that they are housing and providing food to acquaintances, friends, and relatives who were evicted. These networks have also provided symbolic and emotional support. Several of the migrants interviewed stated that they are relieved to know that they are not the only ones who find themselves in a difficult situation. The networks ensure that contacts are created and strengthened thanks to shared experiences and history, generating a feeling of fraternity. Feeling supported by other people who have been or are going through similar situations and are still willing to help brings relief to those going through hard times.

However, sometimes the support of migrant networks is not enough to outweigh the damages of the pandemic, and some migrants have to return to Venezuela without resources.³¹

» **In this context, the interviews highlighted the understanding that returning to Venezuela meant going back to worse conditions than those that incited the initial migration.** Despite going through enormous economic difficulties in Colombia, the interviewees affirm that they do not want to return to Venezuela because (i) they do not have sufficient resources to return and believe returning will not guarantee improvement in their condition; (ii) the return experiences of other migrants during the pandemic have entailed physical and emotional risks; and (iii) the Venezuelan government and the civilian population of Venezuela stigmatize people who return.³²

» **Despite the economic and emotional costs that returning to Venezuela entails, the pandemic has generated a pendulum effect on migratory flows.** Many migrants returned to Venezuela due to the lack of opportunities in Colombia. However, due to the even more pronounced economic crisis in Venezuela, a massive return to Colombia took place as soon as the mandatory quarantine measures were relaxed by the various local Colombian governments.³³

» **The pandemic increasingly exacerbates migrants' social and economic situation; therefore, the effects of the PEP-RAMV may be limited.** However, different migrant testimonies have shown that the PEP-RAMV, despite its limitations, offers more possibilities to immigrants with respect to their relationship with the Colombian State, the labor market, and Colombian society. The economic and social integration of Venezuelans in Colombia continues to be a necessity, especially given the acute economic crisis facing Venezuela³⁴ and the projections of prolonged migration throughout 2021, which will continue to bring migrants in increasingly dire circumstances.³⁵

³³ Itriago, A. y Ríos, J. (2020, octubre 18). El fin de la cuarentena reactiva el retorno de venezolanos a Colombia. El tiempo. <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/gobierno/asi-seria-la-nueva-llegada-de-venezolanos-a-colombia-538482>

³⁴ López, M. (2020, diciembre 28). Nuevo informe advierte que número de refugiados y migrantes venezolanos podría ascender a 7 millones en 2021. Organización de Estados Americanos [OEA]. https://www.oas.org/es/centro_noticias/comunicado_prensa.asp?sCodigo=C-128/20

³⁵ Oficina de la secretaría general para la crisis de migrantes y refugiados venezolanos. (2020). Situación de los venezolanos que han retornado y buscan regresar a su país en el contexto del Covid-19. http://www.oas.org/documents/spa/press/OEA_Returnados-Venezolanos_ESP.pdf

Conclusions

Qualitative interviews with Venezuelan migrants in Colombia allow for insights into the complex challenges they face and how policies can be tailored to facilitate their well-being. Findings from these interviews underscore that measures aimed at integrating the migrant population into the host country, such as those offered by the PEP-RAMV, are necessary for the protection and well-being of Venezuelan migrants

in Colombia, but many face barriers to access it. The interviews also confirm that migrant networks can withstand critical situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, these qualitative findings offer rich avenues for further research, both qualitative and quantitative, to understand how best to address the needs of this vulnerable population in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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