

North–South Return Movements in the Americas: Between Restrictive Policies and Dead-End Pathways

What is happening?

At the beginning of 2025, the new U.S. administration introduced over 20 executive orders that marked a turning point in its migration policy. These measures—including the closure of regular pathways such as the CBP One application, the suspension of temporary protection programs, and humanitarian visas—have significantly impacted migration dynamics across the Americas.

The report, presented by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC LAC) and the ProLAC Initiative, analyzes how the new U.S. migration policies have affected mobility and displacement trends in the region, and what protection risks refugees and migrants now face. It outlines the profiles, routes, and vulnerabilities of people returning southward to South America or stranded en route, as well as the barriers to accessing international protection.

Why does it matter?

The new U.S. migration policies have brought about profound shifts in regional migration patterns. Restrictions on access to international protection have left thousands exposed to high levels of risk and vulnerability, especially those who fled generalized violence or persecution and are now compelled to return to their countries of origin. This is compounded by the dangers faced by those stranded in transit or moving southward in search of alternatives, often navigating unassisted routes controlled by criminal networks.

States across the region were not prepared to respond adequately or in a protection-focused manner to these changes in migratory movements. As a result, the vulnerabilities of people forced to return or relocate across the region to third countries have worsened—often retracing the same perilous routes they had already taken.

What does the data show?

Between January and March 2025, **MMC (4Mi)** and **ProLAC** collected data in nine countries across the region. Their findings reveal that the new U.S. migration restrictions have contributed to a notable movements of return migration to South America.

MMC / 4Mi Findings – Return Dynamics

- **85%** of respondents stated that their return was prompted by **recent changes in U.S. migration policy**, including the shutdown of CBP One, increased deportations, and the closure of regularization channels. This shows that the absence of viable alternatives drives many returns.
- **95%** of returnees were headed toward South America—particularly **Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador**—but **41%** were not returning to their country of origin. Additionally, **42%** were

unclear about their plans upon arrival. These figures highlight the precarious nature of returns and the risk of secondary movements, **underscoring the urgent need for regional reception and integration policies.**

- Most returnees are **young adults** (76% are under 35 years old), and **one-third** are traveling with children. This demographic profile points to **urgent protection, shelter, health, and education needs**, especially for single-parent families and children on the move.

ProLAC Findings – Protection Risks

- In response to U.S. protection restrictions, **several Latin American countries have also reinforced barriers to applying for asylum.** In Mexico, concerns have been raised over the application of the “untimeliness” criterion (for late asylum requests), as well as the rejection or delay of applications following CBP One appointment cancellations. In Peru, the continued **practice of rapidly expelling people with irregular status**, without due process, raises serious concerns about the risk of refoulement.
- **In Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru**—frequent destinations for people in return movements—**contexts of violence, discrimination, and limited access to asylum and regularization persist.** Given these environments, combined with the lack of or difficulty accessing basic services and the limited opportunities for effective integration, **new displacements are likely.**
- **75%** of transit households surveyed in Central and North America in March **were reported as stranded—a 22% increase** compared to the period from November to December 2024. Among these stranded households, **42%** reported experiencing some form of abuse—more than three times higher than among non-stranded households. **The most cited abuses included robbery, extortion, kidnapping, and arbitrary detention.**

What can be done?

Recommendations to States in the Region

1. **Uphold commitments made under the Global Compact for Migration, the Los Angeles Declaration, and the Chile Declaration and Action Plan**, as key frameworks for migration governance and the promotion of refugee and migrant rights. This includes strengthening and expanding safe, regular pathways and accessible regularization programs, and ensuring access to international protection in line with the Cartagena Declaration.
2. **Ensure the freedom of movement of refugees and migrants** in transit through appropriate documentation or specific mechanisms that enable safe migration.
3. **Respect the non-refoulement and non-penalisation principles**, in line with obligations under international law and national legislation. Ensure informed, voluntary, safe, and dignified returns, and promote the reintegration of returnees in their home countries.
4. **Develop joint strategies across regional states** to address return movements and the structural drivers of migration, based on shared responsibility and respect for human rights.

Recommendations to Donors

1. **Prioritize financial support for programs that strengthen national systems** in countries of transit and destination to guarantee access to protection, documentation, and services, following international standards.
2. **Fund protection and assistance programs for refugees and migrants in transit and destination countries**, focusing on legal aid, international protection guidance, regularization support, and service access—especially in light of funding gaps caused by U.S. aid suspensions.

Recommendations to the United Nations and Humanitarian Organizations

1. **Provide technical support and assistance to states in the region** to ensure the protection and rights of refugees and migrants.
2. **Implement a regional migration management approach and strengthen access to essential services along migratory routes**, including shelters and care centers, and ensure adequate provision of housing, food, health care, and more.
3. **Consolidate protection and assistance programs for returnees and their host communities**, as well as for refugees and migrants in Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru.
4. **Promote joint regional analysis of the protection needs and risks faced by returnees and stranded populations**, through coordinated organizational efforts and updated, reliable evidence to inform humanitarian responses.

For more information

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