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Comprehensive perspectives on the Venezuelan exodus in Ecuador: A systematic review

Perspectivas integrales del éxodo venezolano en Ecuador: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

The Venezuelan exodus represents one of the largest migratory flows in Latin America in the last decade, triggering profound social, economic, and community transformations that demand a comprehensive analysis. This study conducts a systematic review, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, to synthesize the scientific evidence on four key dimensions in Ecuador (2017–2022): causes of the exodus, evolution of migration policies, discursive narratives and data on crime, along with psychosocial impacts on migrants and host communities. From an initial 1,248 records identified in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and SciELO, 32 studies were selected after applying rigorous inclusion/exclusion criteria (duplicates removed, quality assessment using AMSTAR 2). The findings reveal that the migration is primarily a forced displacement due to the Venezuelan socioeconomic and political crisis. Ecuadorian policies evolved from an initial humanitarian approach (2017-2018) to restrictive measures (2019-2022), exacerbating irregular migration and discursive tensions in the media and public discourse. Contrary to media perceptions, there is no causal evidence linking the arrival of migrants to the increase in crime, which is attributable to local structural factors such as inequality and institutional weakness. Among the psychosocial impacts, migration-related grief, job insecurity, discrimination, and intergroup conflicts in receiving communities stand out. The study concludes that comprehensive public policies are urgently needed to promote migration regularization, mitigate discursive stigmas, and foster intercultural coexistence, thus contributing to social cohesion in Ecuador.

Keywords: Venezuelan migration, migration policy, psychosocial impacts.

Resumen

El éxodo venezolano representa uno de los flujos migratorios más masivos de América Latina en la última década, desencadenando profundas transformaciones sociales, económicas y comunitarias que demandan un análisis integral. Este estudio realiza una revisión sistemática conforme a los lineamientos PRISMA 2020 para sintetizar la evidencia científica sobre cuatro dimensiones clave en Ecuador (2017-2022): causas del éxodo, evolución de las políticas migratorias, narrativas discursivas y datos sobre criminalidad, junto con impactos psicosociales en migrantes y comunidades receptoras. De 1.248 registros iniciales identificados en bases como Scopus, Web of Science y SciELO, se seleccionaron 32 estudios tras aplicar criterios de inclusión/exclusión rigurosos (duplicados eliminados, evaluación de calidad con AMSTAR 2). Los hallazgos revelan que la migración es primordialmente un desplazamiento forzado por la crisis socioeconómica y política venezolana. Las políticas ecuatorianas evolucionaron de un enfoque humanitario inicial (2017-2018) hacia medidas restrictivas (2019-2022), exacerbando la irregularidad migratoria y tensiones discursivas en medios y discursos públicos. Contrariamente a percepciones mediáticas, no hay evidencia causal entre la llegada de migrantes y el aumento de la criminalidad, atribuible a factores estructurales locales como desigualdad y debilidad institucional. Entre los impactos psicosociales destacan el duelo migratorio, precariedad laboral, discriminación y conflictos intergrupales en comunidades receptoras. Se concluye la urgencia de políticas públicas integrales que promuevan la regularización migratoria, mitiguen estigmas discursivos y fomenten la convivencia intercultural, contribuyendo a la cohesión social en Ecuador.

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Palabras clave: migración venezolana, política migratoria, impactos psicosociales.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the crisis in Venezuela has triggered one of the largest human displacements in recent Latin American history, constituting a phenomenon of forced mobility that extends well beyond conventional economic migration. Between 2017 and 2022, Ecuador emerged as a key destination and transit country for hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan migrants, profoundly reshaping local dynamics. According to the International Labour Organization (OIT, 2020), between 2018 and 2019 Ecuador received approximately 1.4 million Venezuelans, consolidating its position as the host of the fourth largest Venezuelan community worldwide, bringing about deep transformations in its social, economic, and communal structures.

This massive migration stems from a multifaceted crisis marked by galloping hyperinflation, progressive institutional erosion, chronic shortages of food and medicine, as well as mounting insecurity and heightened political conflict. Consequently, this flow must be understood primarily as forced displacement rather than voluntary migration, as emphasized by the United Nations Development Programme (PNUD, 2021).

Profiles of this migrant population reveal distinctive characteristics —without claiming absolute generalizations— including a high proportion of economically active individuals with educational attainment levels comparable to or exceeding the Ecuadorian average. This human capital suggests substantial potential for fostering local development (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones [OIM], 2018; Banco Mundial, 2020a). In practice, however, high rates of underemployment and occupational downgrading persist, with migrants concentrated in low-productivity informal sectors such as street vending or domestic services. This pattern underscores the structural barriers that prevent the leveraging of their skills in Ecuador's labor market, perpetuating cycles of economic vulnerability (OIM, 2018).

In Ecuador, the rapid acceleration of migratory flows coincided chronologically with a notable uptick in crime, particularly between 2019 and 2022. This temporal overlap has fueled a public and media narrative positing a direct causal association between the arrival of Venezuelans and deteriorating citizen security, thereby feeding perceptions of threat. Nevertheless, multiple studies and official data refute such a linkage: no robust empirical evidence connects Venezuelan migration with observed crime spikes (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos y Ministerio del Interior, 2020). On the contrary, consistent analyses identify the expansion of transnational organized crime, the endemic prison crisis, and local institutional weaknesses —including corruption and insufficient police resources— as root causes, explicitly absolving the migrant population of responsibility.

Furthermore, Ramírez and Ospina (2021) underscore the profound psychosocial impacts generated by the Venezuelan exodus. Migrants experience intense migration-related grief, compounded by extreme labor precarity, systematic discrimination, and chronic stress, all intrinsically tied to the forced nature of their mobility and their frequently irregular status. Specialized reports emphasize that the lack of valid documentation, particularly current passports, drastically restricts access to formal employment, health services, and basic education. Host communities, in turn, face challenges arising from sudden intercultural coexistence, exacerbated by media discourses that stigmatize migration as a source of insecurity, thereby fostering prejudice, xenophobia, and intergroup tensions (PNUD, 2021).

Despite the proliferation and diversity of literature on Venezuelan mobility, to date no systematic review has simultaneously integrated the four critical dimensions of the phenomenon in Ecuador: the structural causes of the exodus, the evolution of national migration policies, the relationship (or lack thereof) with crime, and the differentiated psychosocial impacts on migrants and hosts. The present study fills this gap through a PRISMA-guided systematic review, offering a holistic perspective oriented toward more informed, equitable, and humane public policies.

Methodology

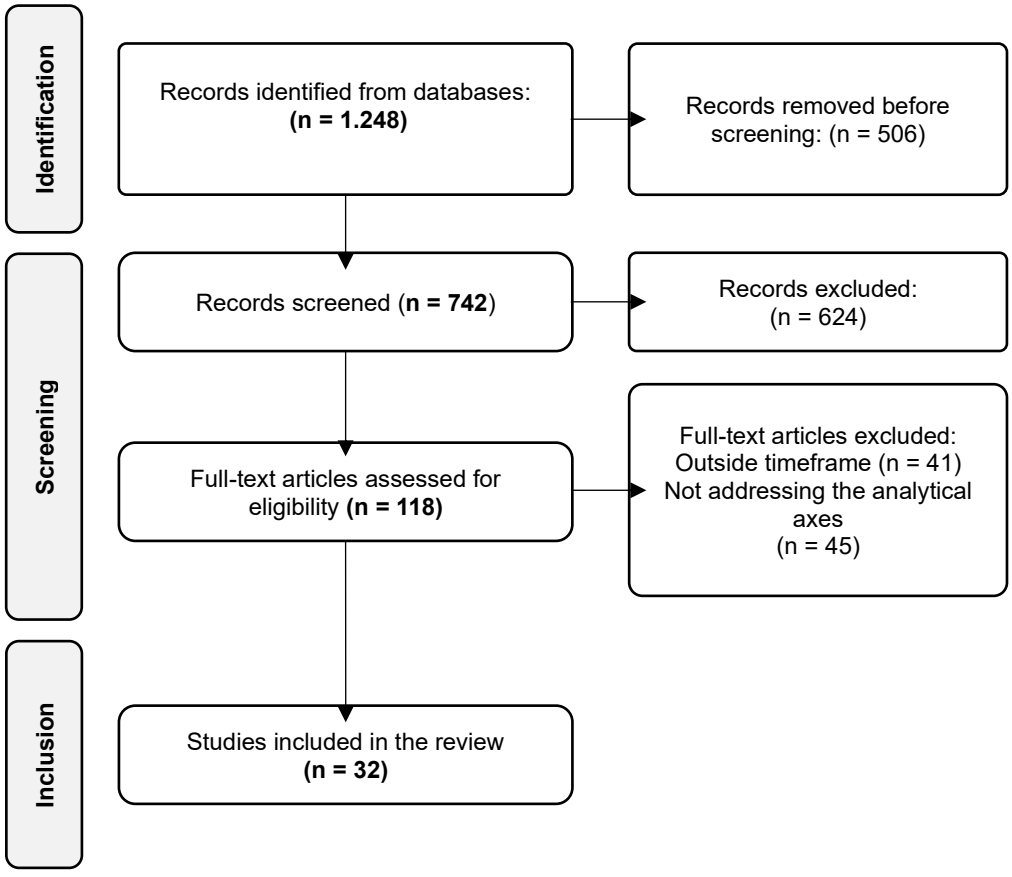
A systematic review was conducted in strict adherence to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), with the aim of identifying, selecting, and synthesizing available scientific evidence on the four key dimensions of the Venezuelan exodus in Ecuador (2017–2022). Systematic searches were performed in Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, and Google Scholar databases, employing controlled descriptors in Spanish and English —such as "migración venezolana," "Venezuelan migration," "políticas migratorias Ecuador," "migratory policies Ecuador," "criminalidad," "crime rates," "impactos psicosociales," and "psychosocial impacts"— combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to maximize both sensitivity and specificity.

Inclusion criteria encompassed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods empirical studies; peer-reviewed articles published in indexed journals; technical reports from recognized international organizations (e.g., OIM, ACNUR, Banco Mundial); and documents specifically centered on the Venezuela-Ecuador axis. Excluded were narrative reviews, editorial opinions, studies falling outside the 2017–2022 timeframe, and those lacking direct empirical focus on the dimensions under analysis (drivers of exodus, migration policies, crime, and psychosocial impacts).

The initial search yielded 1,248 records. After automatic and manual duplicate removal, 742 documents remained. During the title and abstract screening phase —conducted independently by two reviewers with disagreements resolved by a third— 624 articles were excluded for thematic or methodological irrelevance. Subsequently, 118 full-text documents were assessed, of which 86 were discarded: 41 for falling outside the temporal range and 45 for not aligning with the defined analytical axes. Thus, 32 studies met all criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis.

Given the methodological heterogeneity of the selected studies (varying designs, disparate sample sizes, and specific geographical contexts), a qualitative narrative synthesis was chosen over meta-analysis. For data extraction, a standardized matrix (analysis form) was designed to systematically record: authorship and year of publication, methodological design, study type (qualitative/quantitative/mixed), principal variables analyzed, underlying theoretical approaches, key findings, and reported limitations. This approach ensured a thorough and transparent evaluation, minimized bias, and facilitated the thematic integration of evidence.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram of selected articles



Results and discussion

The comprehensive analysis of the 32 studies selected through PRISMA 2020 revealed consistent patterns and empirical convergences across the four central dimensions: the drivers of the Venezuelan exodus, the evolution of Ecuadorian migration policies, the tension between crime-related discourse and empirical evidence, and the differentiated psychosocial impacts on migrants and host communities. The evidence is presented in an integrated and comparative manner, highlighting both theoretical convergences and context-specific nuances across studies published between 2017 and 2022.

Drivers of the Venezuelan exodus

Multiple studies converge in characterizing Venezuelan migration as a direct response to forms of structural violence, thereby challenging simplistic notions of a merely voluntary or economically driven phenomenon. Ruiz and Rodríguez (2020) emphasize that the interplay of unchecked hyperinflation (exceeding 1,000,000% at peaks), prolonged shortages of food and medicine, the collapse of essential public services, and systematic political repression created an uninhabitable environment incompatible with basic human dignity. This perspective aligns with the concept of structural violence—social systems that impede equitable access to vital resources for a dignified life (PNUD, 2021). Reports from Human Rights Watch (2018) corroborate this interpretation, positioning the exodus as a survival strategy in the face of daily insecurity and institutional deterioration. Additionally, the aggravated health crisis—marked by hospital collapses and lack of medical care—has driven critical humanitarian migrations, as documented by the OIM (2018) and PNUD (2021). Finally, Gutiérrez (n.d.) highlights progressive family fragmentation—migration occurring in successive stages—as a key catalyst of individual decision-making and trajectories, transforming the exodus into a collective and prolonged process.

Evolution of Ecuadorian migration policies

Scrutiny of Ecuadorian migration policy reveals a paradigmatic shift that intensified migrant vulnerability. Initially (2017–2018), Ecuador embraced a humanitarian approach anchored in the 2008 constitutional principles of human mobility and universal citizenship, streamlining entry and stay procedures to respond to the initial influx (Burbano et al., 2019). However, the massive scale of arrivals overwhelmed administrative systems, paving the way for a restrictive turn between 2019 and 2020. This shift, driven by record migratory pressures and political-media discourses linking migration to insecurity (Célleri, 2023; INEC & Ministerio del Interior, 2020), introduced measures such as the Exception Visa for Humanitarian Reasons and documentary apostille requirements. These bureaucratic and financial barriers drastically increased irregular migration, hindering access to formal employment, education, healthcare, and social services. Paradoxically, such policies did not contain flows—as observed in similar regional contexts (OIM, 2018; ACNUR, 2020)—but rather deepened precarity, exposing migrants to labor exploitation and humanitarian risks.

Crime discourses and empirical evidence

Regarding the criminalization of Venezuelan migrants, the evidence categorically refutes any causal relationship with rising crime, standing in sharp contrast to dominant public narratives. Official data reveal that migrant involvement in serious offenses is marginal compared to inflated social perceptions (INEC & Ministerio del Interior, 2020). Simbaña and Escobar (2020) attribute crime spikes to internal dynamics: the rise of transnational organized crime, chronic prison crisis, and weaknesses in security forces. Concurrently, Agustín et al. (2022) and Célleri (2023) dissect how the image of the "criminal migrant" is forged through media amplification of isolated incidents in press and social media, displacing structural blame onto external scapegoats. This framing, according to the PNUD (2021), legitimizes discrimination and xenophobia, eroding social cohesion.

Psychosocial impacts on migrants and host communities

Finally, Venezuelan migration generates profound and bidirectional psychosocial impacts. Among migrants, acute migration-related grief predominates—loss of life projects and family rupture (Díaz de Perales & Perales, 2022)—aggravated by labor precarity, exploitation, and deportation threats (Ruiz & Rodríguez, 2020; OIM, 2018). Emotional sequelae such as chronic anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and survivor's guilt emerge, intensified by various forms of irregularity (PNUD, 2021). Likewise, discrimination and xenophobia exacerbate these mental health risks (Gutiérrez, n.d.; Agustín et al., 2022). In host communities, tensions arise from labor competition (Célleri, 2023), but also solidarity initiatives and support networks that promote integration (Simbaña & Escobar,

2020). The perception of threat, rather than actual conflicts, is nourished by associative media discourses, underscoring the primary role of communication in shaping social attitudes (PNUD, 2021).

In sum, the Venezuelan exodus in Ecuador emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon—interweaving structural violence in the country of origin, shifts in host-country policies, distorted media representations, and complex psychosocial dynamics—demanding comprehensive policies that simultaneously prioritize regularization, combat xenophobia, and strengthen institutions.

Conclusions

The evidence synthesized in this systematic review confirms that the Venezuelan exodus toward Ecuador (2017–2022) constitutes a multifaceted and deeply structural phenomenon, where dynamics of collapse in the country of origin, regulatory fluctuations in the host country, sociocultural tensions, and enduring psychosocial repercussions converge. The 32 studies analyzed delineate a consistent framework that illustrates the complex interactions between the Venezuelan crisis, Ecuadorian state responses, and social perceptions, shaping a migratory experience fraught with challenges for migrants and host communities alike.

Venezuelan migration stands primarily as a forced exodus, propelled by hyperinflationary economic collapse, chronic political instability, extreme shortages of basic services, and systematic human rights violations. Beyond purely economic motivations, the literature highlights structural violence that compromised daily subsistence and physical integrity. This characterization converges with international reports documenting inexorable deterioration, driving millions toward cross-border survival.

This context of forced departure contrasted with the paradigmatic transformation of Ecuadorian migration policies. Ecuador experienced an initial shift from a humanitarian approach (2017–2018), inspired by constitutional principles of openness, toward restrictive measures from 2019 onward, justified by public order and security pressures. Such regulations, paradoxically, did not order flows but rather multiplied irregularity, hindering access to decent employment, housing, and essential services, and exacerbating vulnerabilities.

In parallel, a compelling finding dismantles the stigmatization associated with crime: no empirical evidence links Venezuelan migration to increased crime. Official data attribute these spikes to endogenous factors—transnational organized crime, prison crisis, and institutional failures in security and justice. The narrative of "criminal invasion" is fueled by media amplification of isolated cases, catalyzing discrimination and xenophobia.

Complementing these structural and political aspects, profound bidirectional psychosocial impacts are observed. Both migrants and hosts suffer significant consequences: the former face migration-related grief, family ruptures, labor precarity, and chronic stress due to irregularity, with elevated mental health risks. Ecuadorian communities, for their part, register tensions from perceived labor competition and spatial saturation, attenuated, however, by emerging solidarities and integrative networks.

In synthesis, this review posits a holistic approach for state and societal response: integration of expeditious regularization, intercultural programs, targeted psychosocial interventions, and communication campaigns. The evidence demonstrates that punitive policies do not contain migration but rather perpetuate exclusion. Ecuador needs to strengthen institutions, counter stigmatizing narratives, and guarantee full rights to cultivate safe, solidarity-based, and equitable coexistence. In this sense, these findings not only enrich the theoretical corpus on South American migrations but also provide empirical foundations for innovative public policies and psychosocial support programs adapted to local realities.

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