



Migration Profile

PANAMA

A. Executive Summary

During 2021 Panama experienced an increase of migrants in transit, especially Haitians, Venezuelans, and Cubans, who crossed Central America in order to reach the United States. This country has never been a place of immigration and, together with Costa Rica, is one of the Central American countries with the fewest number of immigrants in the world. However, due to its geographical position, it has historically attracted different groups of immigrants. The first ones arrived at the end of the 19th century to work in the construction of the railroad and the interoceanic canal, but later on other immigrants settled in the region, attracted by the low population density of the country.

The country's territory is the narrowest strip in the American continent, between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, and joins South America with Central and North America. In the country there are different migratory phenomena, including refugee applicants and forcibly displaced persons, as well as environmental migrants due to the climate crisis within that territory.

Panama also has a broad legal framework regarding migration, although in the last 5 years the presence of new migratory flows has forced the authorities to seek alternative ways to solve this problematic issue. Several international organisations and other social actors have become involved in handling the human mobility phenomenon.

Despite the small number of immigrants in the past, in the last two decades, Panama's socio-political stability and financial growth have attracted many foreign workers, thanks to the investments in the Canal expansion and to the real estate construction in Panama City. In the 80's and 90's, the country expelled many political dissidents; however, since 2000 it is one of the Central American countries, besides Costa Rica, with a low rate of migrants abroad.

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The Republic of Panama is located at the southeastern end of the Central American Isthmus, with an area of 75,517 square kilometres. Its capital is Panama City. In 2020, the population was estimated at 4,218,808 million people; almost 100% of its inhabitants speak Spanish, and a majority of them is also Catholic, though in recent years Evangelical and other Protestant congregations have proliferated. The official currency is the *balboa*, but the market currency is the US dollar. In addition to the 10 administrative provinces, in the territory there are also five indigenous regions: Kuna Yala, Emberá-Wounaan, Ngäbe-Buglé, Kuna de Wargandí, and Kuna de Madungandí. The country's main indigenous groups include the Ngäbe-Buglé, with 62.3% of indigenous people, the Kunas with 19.3%, the Emberá 7.5%, the Buglé 6.0%, Wounaan 1.7%, Naso/Teribe 1.0%, Bokota 0.5%, and Bri 0.3%.ⁱ

The local economy has experienced a real growth thanks to the expansion and modernization of the interoceanic canal, and its GDP *per capita* in 2019 was 5,731 USD. The population density is 56.6 inhabitants per sq. km, and the birth rate is 17.9%. In the country, social inequality, poverty, and unemployment are concentrated in the interior territories and mostly affect indigenous and Afro-descendant groups. Life expectancy is 85 years for women and 72 for men, while the literacy rate is 94% of the population, 93% for women and 95% for men. The percentage of foreigners out of the total population is 4.45%.

Despite low emigration, there is an influx of agricultural workers from the indigenous communities to other parts of the country and to Costa Rica, involved as cheap labour in plantation fields, mainly for coffee and fruit harvest for export.

II. International and Internal Migrants

According to the UN database,ⁱⁱ Panama is home to 185,072 immigrants, who represent 4.39% of all the inhabitants. Immigration is made up of 94,396 men, equivalent to 51% of the total, compared to 90,676 female immigrants representing 48.99%. The ethnic origin of these immigrants would be: Colombia (24.2%), China (10.7%), the USA (8.6%), Nicaragua (7.4%), Venezuela (7.3%), the Dominican Republic (4.7%), Costa Rica (4.5%), Mexico (2.87%), India (2.4%), and Peru (2.4%).

Their school education is as follows: 14.23% of them did not exceed first grade, 15.32% did not complete primary school, 24.3% completed secondary school, 28.05% completed some university studies, 7.43% had postgraduate studies, and 6.24% had a non-university higher education. The job placement of this population is distributed in the following areas: services and commerce (28.76%), management (15.31%), unskilled labor (14.72%), scientists and professionals (11.77%), construction and manufacturing (9.72%), medium technicians (9.13%), office employees (3.52%), informal employment (3.19%), machine operators (2.06%), and employed in agriculture (1.80%).

Normally, those who migrate to Panama use regular channels, mainly through Tocumen International Airport, border posts at Paso Canoas (northern border with Costa Rica); but they also cross through other formal entries such as airstrips, ports, and marinas, where entries and exits are all recorded. However, there are other ways for the unauthorised entry of migrants into the country, through its extensive coastline and porous land borders with Colombia and Costa Rica. The extensive Darien region bordering Colombia in the far east of the country has in recent years become an important crossing point for immigrants coming from different countries like Cuba, Haiti, Bangladesh, and Somalia arriving from South America and trying to then reach the USA.ⁱⁱⁱ

Since the mid-2010s, a considerable number of immigrants entered the country by using unconventional ways. According to statistics from the Migration Directorate, between the years 2015 to 2020 the border with Colombia registered the entry of 89,777 immigrants, coming from various regions of the world. These are their countries of origin: 47% from the Caribbeans, 37% from Central Africa, 10% from South Asia, 3% from West Africa, 2% from East Africa and 1% from North Africa. The causes that force these groups to migrate, according to the information collected by public institutions and international organisations, are: 75% the economic situation in their countries of origin, 8% insecurity and lack of access to basic services, including protection, 8% a combination of financial problems and poor access to basic services, 9% face a combination of some or all of the above-mentioned causes.

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the route of extra-regional migrants begins by air or sea from the countries of origin to Brazil or Chile, and from those countries they then travel by land routes through the territories of Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. Part of this route goes through the jungle area of northern Colombia to the Darien region in southeastern Panama. The destination countries are: USA 68%, Mexico 14%, Canada 7%, and 11% are not sure where to go. 45% of them travel alone and the rest with family members or groups, many of which are formed during the migratory journey; 51% are adult men, 21% are adult women and the remaining people are children. During this journey, 53% run out of money and resources to survive which leads them to beg; 21% of migrants lack information; 36% face other adversities.^{iv}

Until 2010, internal migration in Panama was larger than international migration; however, this situation changed over the subsequent decade because of the growth of immigration and the number of transmigrants. Although there are no updated estimates of the flow of internal migrants, they are mostly people moving from one province to another. Internal migration is particularly common among indigenous communities, and it is estimated that almost half of them live outside these communities due to internal migration.^v

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

According to UN data, Panama has 161,107 emigrants, who represents 3.82% of the country's population. Female emigration (82,892), 51.45% of the total number of emigrants, has been

growing more than male emigrants (78,215, corresponding to 48.54%). The main destination countries for Panamanians are the USA (77.79%), followed by Costa Rica (7.20%), and Spain (2.73%). In recent years, the number of emigrants has increased by 11,887 people, which corresponds to 7.97%.

Panamanians abroad have an important financial impact on their country, thanks to their remittances: for the year 2020, \$256,648,249.51 entered the country and \$355,396,179.44 left, with a deficit of \$98,747,930; however, it has to be taken into account the fact that emigrants are 13% less than the number of immigrants living in Panama.

Despite their small proportion, emigrants are individuals with a high level of education, especially those moving to the USA, where Panamanians are the group of Central American immigrants with the highest level of schooling, allowing them to have the best jobs and, consequently, the best income. Instead, cross-border migration to Costa Rica is mostly made up of indigenous migrants with less education, who are usually employed as cheap labour in agricultural crops in the destination country.

IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees, climate displaced people)

Panama is both a transit and destination country for asylum seekers. There are currently about 15,000 recognized refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Venezuela. Since 1990, 2,589 people have been recognized as refugees, and, in 2020, 32 people were granted this status.

Based on a monitoring conducted by UNHCR,^{vi} in 2019, as a cause of forced departure from their respective countries, refugee claimants indicated that 60% experienced threats and intimidation, 40% suffered violence and insecurity, 27% were affected by persecution and discrimination, and 6% involved the risk of forced recruitment of minors. 27% entered through Tocumen Airport, and 21% entered through the land borders with Costa Rica and Colombia. 57% of the migrants entered alone, 40% in family groups, 3% with other people, and 0.4% in caravans.

39% of the applicants for refugee status had completed secondary education, 15% had technical training, and 27% had a university education. 24% were unemployed, 21% were in informal employment, 10% worked as domestic servants, 9% were homemakers, 8% did street vending, and 7% worked as independent professionals. A significant majority (65%) rented a house, and only 9% owned their place. Among them, 23% had as a priority their immigration regularisation, 20% access to work, 17% documentation, 9% housing, 8% food, and 6% health.

Despite the lack of information on climate displacement in the country, rising sea levels have become a threat to the inhabitants of coastal and island communities. This is the case of 80,000 people of the San Blas Archipelago in the Caribbean, off the coast of Panama. This population is

largely made up of the Guna community, one of the country's oldest indigenous peoples, who could be forced to abandon the places they currently occupy as a result of the rising seas.

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking and related activities are considered a crime in Panama. The number of victims of trafficking is not updated. Although the Violence Observatory of the Integrated System of Criminal Statistics identified 91 cases in 2018, it is possible that cases have increased in the last three years because of the arrival of new flows of migrants. As of 2018, trafficking victims were Colombian, Venezuelan, Panamanian, Dominican, Nicaraguan and others of unknown nationality. Trafficking victims were recruited mainly for sexual exploitation, but also in many cases for labor exploitation and servitude.^{vii}

VI. National Legal Framework

The regulatory framework for migration in the country is Decree Law No. 3 of 2008, which created the National Immigration Service and the Immigration Career and established other provisions. The purpose of this Decree Law is to regulate the migratory movement of entries and exits of nationals and foreigners, the residence of immigrants in the national territory; to establish the requirements and procedures to acquire the Panamanian nationality by naturalisation, and to create the National Immigration Service and the Immigration Career.

Under Law No. 5 of October 26, 1977, the Convention and Protocol on the Status of Refugees were approved, and it complies with the safeguard against the expulsion of refugees.

By Decree Law No. 8 of August 20, 2008, the National Border Service of the Republic of Panama was created as a police institution specialising in border areas.

Among the most recent changes, in 2016, the Executive Decree 167 was issued, which allowed the regularisation of a significant number of irregular migrants and established an integration program that became known as *Crisol de Razas* (Crucible of Races).

Law 79 passed on November 9, 2011 and adopted regulations to combat human trafficking. Executive Decree 10-2019 regulated Law 28 of March 30, 2011, which ratified the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.^{viii}

VII. Main Actors

The State

The Panamanian migratory system is the set of governmental institutions watching over the migrant, the regulation of the entry and exit of nationals and foreigners, as well as the transit, stay and permanence of foreigners in the national territory under the different migratory categories. This system is formed by the Ministry of Public Security, the National Migration

Service, the Consultative Council of Migration, the Public Force, the inspectors, and the migratory supervisors.

The Catholic Church

The *Pastoral de Movilidad Humana* was founded within the Apostolic Vicariate of Darien, at the end of the 90's, thanks to the initiative of some pastoral agents together with their bishop, at that time the Most Rev. Romulo Emiliani. The services of the *Pastoral de Movilidad Humana* offer basic humanitarian assistance, education, social and legal orientation, psychosocial assistance, labour insertion, pastoral accompaniment, and awareness and information. Previously, the Catholic Church served the migrant and refugee population through the initiatives of the pastoral offices of each parish and through the parish Caritas. Since 2010, the *Pastoral de Movilidad Humana* has been part of the Social Ministry Council of the Episcopal Conference of Panamá.

The Jesuit Migrant Service carries out activities to protect the rights of migrant and refugee individuals and families in Panama, by enacting strategies to receive and protect them, and creating the conditions for their promotion and social and labour integration in the Panamanian society.

International organisations

Panama is home to several international agencies working with migrants, refugees, and victims of human trafficking. UNHCR attends to refugee applicants at both borders, the United Nations Development Program supports the development of guidelines for the care of migrant women on family planning issues and technical support to the Panamanian State in the development of programs to address forced displacement, UNAIDS is focused on promoting the protection of people with HIV and sexually diverse population in the context of human mobility in the country, IOM has its world administrative headquarters in the City of Research and addresses issues related to labour mobility, protection of migrant population and addresses issues of institutional strengthening to improve migration governance.

Other Organisations

In Panama there are different organisations serving migrants, especially those arriving into the country through the Darien region. It is worth mentioning the Norwegian Refugee Council and the National Commission for Justice and Peace, in addition to the organisations already described in this report.

January 2022

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ⁱⁱ UN-DESA. International Migration Stock. Monitoring Global Population Trends. (U. Nations, Ed.) United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ BBC News, Mundo. *El infierno de cruzar el Tapón del Darién, la región más intransitable y peligrosa de América Latina (que corta en dos la ruta Panamericana)* (31 enero 2018)

^{iv} International Organization for Migration. *Panama – Analysis of flow monitoring surveys to extra regional migrants (June 2019)*.

^v Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas. *Atlas social de Panamá. Migración reciente en Panamá*.

^{vi} UNHCR. Protection Monitoring. Panamá. 2019.

^{vii} CELAM. *Síntesis de la realidad de la migración forzada y de la trata en América Latina y El Caribe 2021*. Colombia. 2021.

^{viii} See also Pikielny, M. S. *Institutional and Legal Migratory Framework of the Republic of Panamá: A Working Paper*. Migration Policy Institute. 2021.