



## Migration Profile

### BELIZE

#### A. Executive Summary

Belize is a Caribbean and Central American country on the northeastern coast of Central America.<sup>i</sup> Its landscapes comprise coastal areas, vast plains and dense tropical forests of great wealth for lumber.<sup>ii</sup>

It is an emigrant-sending country and, simultaneously, one of Central America's three main immigrant-receiving countries.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, the country has a rich ethnic and cultural diversity and there is an essential contribution from the diaspora to the development of both families and the national well-being.<sup>iv</sup>

Regarding immigration, the principal origin countries in 2020 were Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, the United States and Mexico.<sup>v</sup> Internally, there are urban-rural movements mainly due to the emigration of ethnic populations to rural areas.<sup>vi</sup> In terms of emigration patterns to foreign countries, most Belizean citizens who migrate go to the United States, Mexico, Canada and other English-speaking Caribbean countries.<sup>vii</sup> They seek opportunities for jobs and education in these countries since English is Belize's official language.<sup>viii</sup>

Refugees mainly come from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua.<sup>ix</sup> Historically, they flee their countries to escape wars, crimes and gangs.<sup>x</sup> xi Belize integrates them and provides public health, education and legal services.<sup>xii</sup>

The principal sectors of Belize's GDP are services (74.7%), industries (14.5%), and agriculture (10.8%).<sup>xiii</sup> This explains the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Belize's economy due to the precipitous decrease in the tourism sector.<sup>xiv</sup> Seventy percent of its tourists come from the United States, as does the flow of remittances.<sup>xv</sup> Thus, Belize's economy is highly dependent on external factors and agricultural development (highly impacted by the number of natural disasters in the country).<sup>xvi</sup>

In 2021, its GDP was US\$ 1,789,923,260,<sup>xvii</sup> and it saw an annual growth rate of 9.8% of its GDP compared with the previous year, which registered a -16.8% decrease.<sup>xviii</sup> Foreign Direct Investment net inflows amounted to 4.8% of its GDP in 2020.<sup>xix</sup> Belize had a Human Development Index of 0.720 in 2019, positioning it at 103 out of 189 countries and territories.<sup>xx</sup>

#### B. Country Profile

## I. Basic Information

Belize is a Central American country that borders Mexico, Guatemala and the Caribbean Sea.<sup>xxi</sup> The country has an area of 22,964 Km<sup>2</sup> and a population of approximately 420,000.<sup>xxii</sup> Its capital city, Belmopan, has 20,621 inhabitants.<sup>xxiii</sup> Other important cities are Belize City (61,461 inhabitants) and San Ignacio/Santa Elena (21,151 inhabitants).<sup>xxiv</sup> The territory is mainly flat, and rainforests are abundant in the country.<sup>xxv</sup>

A large majority of its population is multilingual. English is the official language (spoken by 62.9%), but Belizeans also speak other languages: Spanish (56.6%), Belizean Creole (44.6%), indigenous Mayan languages (Q'eqchi' Maya 6%, and Mopan 3.6%), German (3.2%), and Garifuna (2.9%).<sup>xxvi</sup> As for ethnic groups, there is a diverse composition: 52.9% are Mestizos (mixed Spanish and Amerindian), Creoles (mixed British and African) represent 25.9%, Mayas 11.3%, Garifuna (mixed Caribbean and African) 6.1%, East Indians 3.9%, Mennonites 3.6%, Whites 1.2%, Asian 1%, and others 1.5%.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Christianity is the majority religion in Belize, with 74.3% of the population professing one of the Christian religions. Roman Catholics account for 40.4%, Protestants 31.8%, and Jehovah's Witnesses 1.7%. Other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Rastafarianism, account for 9.6% of the population. 15.6% are not affiliated with any religion.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## II. International and Internal Migration

In 2020, Belize registered 62,043 migrants (49.7% women and 50.3% men). 43.14% were from Guatemala, 16.14% from El Salvador, 15.77% from Honduras, 7.49% from the United States and 6.44% from Mexico.<sup>xxix</sup>

Guatemalan migrants are mainly the traditional Kekchi Maya Indians and the Mopan Maya and Mestizo peoples.<sup>xxx</sup> They often have family on both sides of the border and travel regularly to their country of origin. For instance, the Melchor de Mencos municipality facilitates the movement of Guatemalans working in Belize's urban areas such as San Ignacio, Santa Elena and Belmopan. Belizean employers provide work permits; meanwhile, Belizean citizenship can be requested after five years of residence.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Employment opportunities and political stability attract most migrants from rural Guatemala and El Salvador.<sup>xxxii</sup> Sugar and banana agro-industries are the main sectors recruiting immigrant populations in Corozal and Orange Walk. Many Honduran migrants prefer to work in the banana industry as they have previous experience producing this crop in their home country. Moreover, resettlement programs in the Cayo region represent an opportunity for immigrants to acquire land and develop diverse farming activities.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Stan Creek District has experienced an increasing growth in the mestizo population due to the seasonal labour demand in the banana and citrus plantations.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Currently, territorial disputes between Guatemala and Belize constitute one of the biggest fears for Mayan communities.<sup>xxxv</sup>

As a result, the country is undergoing a "Latinization" process since Spanish speakers from Central American countries are replacing the Afro-Belizean population.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Mestizo

(Spanish-Indian mixed) and Maya ethnicities have modified the spatial distribution of the country's population by settling in rural areas.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Corozal and Orange Walk primarily house populations from the Yucatan Peninsula, whereas most Mayas have preferred to settle in the Toledo and Cayo Districts.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The rapid population growth in rural areas, to the detriment of the urban population, is due to both the emigration of urban ethnic populations such as the Creoles and Garifuna and the settlement of immigrant populations in rural areas, generation after generation.<sup>xxxix</sup> Today, the Mestizo population has outnumbered the Creole ethnic group, the leading ethnic group until 1980.<sup>xl</sup>

Gang-related violence is common in southern Belize.<sup>xli</sup> At-risk populations are deprived of health and education, especially in the Toledo district, the least populated and most rural district in Belize.<sup>xlii</sup> In this area, a high proportion of the population is uneducated. Recent studies have highlighted the vulnerability of Mestizo and Maya ethnic groups despite higher literacy rates amongst the youngest generation.<sup>xliii</sup>

### **III. Emigration and Skilled Migration**

In Belize, around 16% of the population lives abroad.<sup>xliv</sup> The stock of Belizean emigrants abroad is expected to be 58,687,<sup>xlv</sup> but there is no existing national system that collects precise emigration data.<sup>xlvi</sup> The top destination countries are the United States, Mexico, Canada and other English-speaking Caribbean countries.<sup>xlvii</sup> Belizeans seeking job and educational opportunities prefer the United States to Great Britain because of the former's closer proximity and stronger ties with Belize.<sup>xlviii</sup>

The emigration of a large share of Creoles and the influx of Central American immigrants has changed Belize's ethnic composition. Mestizos have become the largest ethnic group, and the country now has more native Spanish speakers than English or Creole speakers.<sup>xlix</sup> In the year 2000, the Mestizo population represented 50% of the population and the Creole 25%.<sup>1</sup>

Most Belizean emigrants are Creole women between the ages of 15 and 24 who emigrated from urban areas.<sup>li</sup> The most recent data (2013) shows that they usually have at least a high school education or higher.<sup>lii</sup> Nevertheless, it is assumed that many Belizean migrants are residing irregularly in the United States.<sup>liii</sup> This has significant consequences for the Belizean population, mostly in periods of restrictive policies for accessing services and protecting their rights.<sup>liv</sup> They usually travel to the U.S. through porous Mexican borders (due to bilateral agreements for border crossings) and enter the U.S. through Tijuana, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and other coastal routes.<sup>lv</sup>

Remittances in 2021 amounted to US\$ 139.5 million and contributed to the development of families and national well-being.<sup>lvi</sup> Nevertheless, this also challenges the State regarding reduced capabilities, social disintegration and a limited workforce. These are the challenges Belize faces as a result of the influence of the diaspora.<sup>lvii</sup> Several "returnee" programs have been underutilised, and it isn't easy to attract investment and technical aid from Belizeans abroad.<sup>lviii</sup>

#### **IV. Forced Migrants (Internally Displaced Persons, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Climate-Displaced Persons)**

In 2022, 4,130 refugees and asylum seekers were registered in Belize.<sup>lix</sup> They came mainly from El Salvador (66.68%), Honduras (19.49%), Guatemala (11.47%), and Nicaragua (1.45%).<sup>lx</sup>

People from these countries have historically arrived in Belize after fleeing their countries. Many people left these countries in the 1970s and 1980s to escape various conflicts. In this context, the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR intervened and established refugee camps, which eventually became towns in Belize such as Valle de la Paz<sup>lxi</sup> or Armenia.<sup>lxii</sup>

After the conflicts in their countries of origin, the Belizean government gave refugees in Belize the option of returning home or acquiring nationality. Most of the refugee population decided to stay.<sup>lxiii</sup>

Since 2009, Belize has started receiving asylum applications again. In 2015, the situation of violence in El Salvador worsened, leading to the displacement of thousands of people.<sup>lxiv</sup> Gangs began to exert strong territorial control; extortion, restrictions on mobility, kidnapping and violence were the main factors forcing people to move and seek asylum in Belize.<sup>lxv</sup> In the case of Honduras, the existence of gangs, violence and insecurity is similar, forcing people to flee the country.<sup>lxvi</sup> In the case of Nicaragua, the latest social and political crisis has forced thousands of people to move abroad.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Belize's Refugee Act, Chapter 165 of the Substantive Laws of Belize, does not recognise legal asylum status and treats all asylum seekers as potential refugees, with courts and executive offices using refugee procedures to cover refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>lxviii</sup> Furthermore, in 2017 the Government of Belize joined the Regional Integrated Framework for Protection and Solutions (RIFPS) to respond to this phenomenon.<sup>lxix</sup>

Through its legislation, Belize recognises the rights and freedoms of refugees and asylum seekers in the national legal system and international human rights instruments, including the right not to be expelled or returned to their country of origin, the right not to receive any sanction for their irregular entry or presence in the country, the right to remain and move freely in the country while the asylum application is being processed, and the right to access public health, education and legal services. Persons with refugee status can work legally in the country, have the right to family reunification, to receive a personal identification document, and to have rights equivalent to permanent residents in Belize.<sup>lxx</sup> <sup>lxxi</sup> Moreover, intending to integrate the refugee population into Belizean society, the Government of Belize has launched the Amnesty Programme 2022,<sup>lxxii</sup> aimed at persons who meet specific requirements and offering them permanent residency as a pathway to citizenship after five years.<sup>lxxiii</sup> <sup>lxxiv</sup>

#### **V. Victims of Human Trafficking**

Belize is on tier 2 of the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report since it does not meet the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. Although most

of the victims are Belizean, traffickers also exploit foreign victims from Central America, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, and Asia. Migrants are not provided by law with work permits, placing them in constant threat of deportation and vulnerability to trafficking. They are recruited through false promises of relatively high-paying jobs and then exploited in restaurants, shops, domestic work, and agriculture. Sex tourists (mainly from the USA) exploit child victims within the country. Women and girls are sexually exploited in bars, nightclubs, hotels, and brothels. Due to the pandemic, sex trafficking moved to illegal brothels and involved a network of taxi operators, hindering reporting. Family members facilitate sex trafficking, including arrangements with wealthy men in exchange for payments or gifts, which has expanded to Guatemalan victims unable to pay school fees in Belize.<sup>lxxv</sup>

Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are common issues in the Caribbean region. The U.S. Department of State identifies Belize as a transit and destination country for sexual exploitation. As a result, Belize is constantly reforming human trafficking complicity standards to avoid economic sanctions imposed by the U.S.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

In 2021, Belize demonstrated increasing efforts, including convicting two traffickers, applying adequate sentences, and expanding the size of its Anti-Trafficking (A-TIP) Police Unit. It initiated 15 trafficking investigations against 20 individuals in 2021, besides the 15 ongoing investigations from previous years. Authorities initiated one new sex trafficking prosecution of four Belizean adults (three men) and continued five prosecutions of six traffickers (two carried out during the reporting period). Furthermore, the A-TIP Police Unit continued training officials to combat human trafficking. In 2021, authorities identified three confirmed victims (compared to 20 in 2020) from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Belize. NGOs identified a further six trafficking victims (from Honduras, Mexico, and Colombia).<sup>lxxvii</sup>

The state provides a wide range of services for victims, including housing, medical, counselling, education, food, clothing, legal documents, and repatriation, as well as dental care, psychiatric services, and prenatal care, among others. There are also adapted services for disabled persons. Adult victims and their families are hosted in DHS's Alternative Care Unit, and unaccompanied children are sent to the Child Protection System. An NGO operated a 24-hour "crime stoppers" hotline and the A-TIP Council developed another toll-free telephone line. It also sponsored billboards to combat child sex tourism at the international airport and border crossing points and participated in international projects.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

Nevertheless, law enforcement authorities lacked the resources to conduct large-scale trafficking investigations effectively. There were no new investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking. Likewise, labour inspectors reported a shortage of qualified personnel, vehicles, fuel, and operating funds to conduct adequate inspections for labour violations.<sup>lxxix</sup>

## **VI. National Legal Framework**

The national legislative framework relating to migration in Belize includes the Constitution of Belize, 1981 (with amendments through 2011)<sup>lxxx</sup> and the Immigration Act (Chapter 156,

revised in 2000).<sup>lxxxii</sup> They regulate categories of immigrants, passports, entry permits, permanent residency, permanent employment, kinds of temporary permits and duties of immigrants entering Belize.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The Nationality Act (Chapter 161, revised in 2011) and the Aliens Act (Chapter 159, revised in 2011) control the conditions of entry, movement, stay, and work of aliens who are third-country nationals<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

The Belize Refugees Act Chapter 165 of the Substantive Laws of Belize, 2011 applies protection to the refugee population and the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees from 1951.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Additionally, the 2013 Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) Act criminalised various offences relating to the prostitution of anyone younger than 18.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

Belize is part of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Global Forum on Migration Development (GFMD), and the Global Compact on Migration.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> It is a member state of the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), which is a regional consultative process on migration in Central and North America.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> In addition, Belize is part of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), the Implementing Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS) and the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), as well as the Regional Coalition against Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling (CORETT).<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Belize signed and ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Migration for Employment Convention, 1949 and 1961; the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), 1990; the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000; and the United Nations conventions on statelessness, 1954.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

## **VII. Main actors**

### *The State*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration Services includes the key departments that manage migration processes in Belize.<sup>xc</sup> The Department of Border Management and Immigration Services (DBMIS) is mandated to facilitate the travel of Belizean nationals and foreign nationals and to combat irregular migration.<sup>xcii</sup> The Department of Nationality and Passports manages the residency and citizenship processes.<sup>xcii</sup> The Department for Refugees is responsible for the case management of asylum seekers and persons in need of protection<sup>xciii</sup>, and the Refugee Eligibility Committee reviews applications for refugee status.<sup>xciv</sup>

The Ministry of National Defence and Border Security oversees the military and the Coast Guard. At the same time, the Ministry of Home Affairs and New Growth Industries is

responsible for police and prisons. The Belize Police Department is primarily responsible for internal security.<sup>xcv</sup>

The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council and the Department of Human Services, located within the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, provide support to victims of trafficking and unaccompanied minors. This Ministry is also responsible for handling the refugee process, providing them with protection, and assisting with their needs.<sup>xcvi</sup>

Regarding emigration issues, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration, through its consular services abroad, is the only agency that maintains relations with the diaspora. It has established bilateral extradition agreements with Mexico, Guatemala and the United States of America to ensure expedited procedures for the safe arrival of forced returnees.<sup>xcvii</sup>

### *International Organizations*

The government cooperated with the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and other international organisations to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, vulnerable migrants, and other persons of concern.<sup>xcviii</sup>

UNHCR in Belize has a resource centre near the western border that provides information on the refugee process to new arrivals.<sup>xcix</sup> In partnership with the Government of Belize, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration, with support from NGO partners Help for Progress, Humana People to People Belize and the Human Rights Commission of Belize,<sup>c</sup> it provides limited essential services, including shelter, clothing, food, counselling, and assistance with processing legal documents.<sup>ci</sup>

IOM has been collaborating with the government on projects that work to document its citizens through the establishment of secure passport issuance systems and a biometric subsystem for duplicate identity checking.<sup>cii</sup> Projects have also been implemented to strengthen the fight against trafficking in persons and to improve government capacities for migration management. Also, through its Assisted Voluntary Return program, the IOM office assisted in repatriating 189 migrants between June 2020 and September 2021.<sup>ciii</sup>

UNICEF, UNHCR and IOM support the Government of Belize in extending the amnesty application period. At the end of 2021, the government announced the Amnesty Program 2022 and launched it in August 2022. It aims to grant permanent residency to migrants and provide a complementary protection pathway to refugees and asylum seekers who qualify and have been living in Belize for many years.<sup>civ</sup>

### *NGOs and Other Organisations*

The Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) contributes regionally to support forced displaced populations and promote a stable environment in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama.<sup>cv</sup> Belize's

department has several focus areas: protection, jobs and livelihoods, and education. It has improved standard operating procedures, provided language education and training services, and increased the overall recognition rate of refugees in the country.<sup>cvii</sup>

Help for Progress in Belize also supports asylum seekers by assisting them financially and providing them with the necessary information about their administrative and documentation requirements.<sup>cviii</sup> Furthermore, the Human Rights Commission of Belize works with immigrants, refugees, and other vulnerable populations to promote education and human rights in the country.<sup>cxiii</sup>

Humana People to People has several projects in the country for the migrant community. The 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers' project focuses on enhancing access to essential services, information, opportunities, and basic needs for asylum seekers in Bella Vista, San Isidro and Trio Villages in the Toledo District.<sup>cxix</sup> The Migrant Hub project assists migrants and returnees with information on migration procedures, offers support on migration services and refers them to IOM's voluntary repatriation program.<sup>cx</sup>

### *The Catholic Church*

The Diocese of Belize is associated with the Archdiocese of Jamaica and has a Commission for Human Development and Justice.<sup>cxvi</sup>

The Episcopal Conference is also present in Belize. Belize has indeed historically been considered part of the Province of Kingston, Jamaica, within the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC).<sup>cxvii</sup>

The work of the St. Ignatius Parish Conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP) focuses on providing basic foodstuffs (rice, beans, flour, sugar, milk, chicken, and some canned food) to the neediest people.<sup>cxviii</sup>

Caritas Belize assists vulnerable populations in the country and brings support towards conflicts and disasters such as Hurricane Irma in 2017, when it activated all the parishes, volunteers helped vulnerable people and opened churches as shelters to provide care to the survivors.<sup>cxix</sup>

The Jesuit Refugee Service, through the St. Martin de Porres and St. Peter Claver Parish, provides food for the hungry in Belize.<sup>cxv</sup> The Jesuit Migrant Accompaniment Program focuses on research, accompaniment and advocacy to build a solidarity and inclusive society in the country and promote migrants' and refugees' rights.<sup>cxvi</sup> They also offer courses to parents to assist their children in building a community among migrant families.<sup>cxvii</sup>

**January 2023**

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